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Approach the Throne of Grace
Hebrews 4:14-16

*Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us **hold fast to our confession**.¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested^[d] as we are, yet without sin.¹⁶ Let us therefore **approach the throne of grace with boldness**, so that we may receive **mercy and find grace** to help in time of need.*

In her book, *Sailboat Church*, Joan Gray talks about how we must move **from rowing to sailing**—
from people who rely upon ourselves,
To people who rely upon God!

What if this passage shows us the way?

What if we are to approach the throne—and ask for the help we need?
We won't receive if we don't ask, right?

If we want God to be our power source, we need to **ask for God's power!**
And, how do we do that?

Prayer.

That's the **main way we approach the throne of grace**—
by going to God in prayer.

But is prayer **just asking God** for what we want?

Is **God like a divine vending machine?**

Is there a magic formula for prayer?

Is there a guarantee that we get what we request?

Scripture doesn't say that.

What it does say about prayer is that OUR lives are changed—in ways we could never imagine!

Has that ever happened to you?

Have you ever prayed, and **been changed** by the prayer?

Have you ever asked for something in prayer,

and **received far more** than you could have imagined?

I can't think of many times that prayers have been answered in new and different ways, ways I would never have thought to ask!

The other thing about prayer is it's a *two-way street*—
We *don't just go* to God in prayer,
We *listen* to God in prayer.

I'm using a new devotional called *Common Prayer*.
It's kind of a modern twist on the old Book of Common Prayer.
And there's a daily section that includes reflection, prayers, songs, psalms, and questions.
One thing I love about it is that it's not just one way to pray—
it takes into account all different ways to pray—
speaking, meditating, listening, reading, singing.

And it's a reminder that *prayer is not about us*.
It's about God—*God at work, in us, around us, and through us*.
That's why it's so powerful to pray that *God's will be done*,
Just like Jesus taught us to pray in the *Lord's Prayer*.

In fact, Gray suggests a simple prayer, as a way to *raise a sail on our sailboat*:

*“God, I trust that your will is the best thing that can happen to me today.
Let your will be done in everything, no matter what it is.
Make me a graceful presence wherever I go.
In, around, through, and in spite of me,
let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen”*.
Joan Gray, *Sailboat Church*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2014, Pg. 52

What if we prayed that each day?
God, I trust that your will is the best thing that can happen to me today.

It's *not always easy to believe that*, is it?
So often we believe that rowing our own boat is better.
And that we can handle our problems better than God.
We are pretty *proud, and stubborn* people, aren't we?

But there might be *another reason we don't trust that God's will is best---
God knows too much*.
God knows everything about us, right?

Listen to the *context* of our passage today—
to what Hebrews says just before our verses.
It's striking!

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Wow.

This might be why we fail to approach God sometimes.
Because God's word pierces our soul,
and judges everything in our hearts.

Nothing is hidden before God—

and we do have to ***render an account*** to God for our lives.

In ancient days, to approach the ***throne of a king was scary—***
it was a time of fear and trembling,
because you were going before someone who held power over you.

And God not only holds all the power in the world,
God knows absolutely everything about us!

The Psalmist reminds us of this in **Psalm 139**, when he says:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

² *You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.*

³ *You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

⁴ *Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.*

The Psalmist reminds us that God even knows the number of hairs on our head!

But here's the deal:

The throne of God is ***NOT a throne of fear and trembling!***

It is a throne of ***grace.***

In fact, we can approach God in boldness,
precisely ***because*** God knows everything about us.

Precisely *because* God's word cuts to the heart, and lays bare our soul.
 God is the great physician, *cutting into our hearts, to bring healing* to our lives.

The truth is, *God knows everything* about us,
 And *accepts* us just as we are,
 But, God *loves us too much to leave us that way!*

Which is why we approach the throne of grace--
 To find *mercy and grace to help* in our times of need.

Don't we all have times of need?

Don't we all need mercy and grace?

Of course we do!

We're all broken people—who need a Savior, right?

And the good news is we have one!

And not just any Savior.

We have one who is fully divine, *and fully human.*

Who *knows our every weakness,*

Who has been *tested* just like we are,

But without sin.

Jesus *knows what we go through* on a daily basis.

How often do you think about that?

Do you realize that when you pray and reach out to God,

That Jesus really understands what you're saying?

The Bible says again and again that *Jesus is our intercessor,*

The one who goes to God for us and with us,

Because he too was human.

Just without sin.

Which is interesting.

We might wonder, *how can you be human without sin?*

Well, if we remember the Garden of Eden, humans were created good.

They *were without sin* until they ate from the tree, against God's will.

Humanity is created to be good, and pure.

Jesus was *that kind of human.*

But because he was human, he knows what it's like to *suffer*,
to feel *weak and worn out*, to be *betrayed*,
he knows what it feels like to be *tempted*.
This is *why we can approach* the throne of grace—*with boldness*.

This is also our ticket to sailing,
Joan Gray says that *prayer is like the mainsail*,
And connected to prayer is *obedience, sacrifice, and discernment*.
None of which is popular in our world today.
Joan Gray, *Sailboat Church*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2014, Pg. 53-55.

Because we don't want to OBEY anyone.

That's what makes people so riled up about any mandates.
We don't want anyone to tell us what to do right?
Well, when it comes to following Christ, we are called to listen and obey.
The world says you can do whatever you want.
That is *not true in the kingdom* of God.
In the kingdom *our true calling and our best path* in life is to obey Jesus Christ.
And ***God's will is the best thing that can happen today!***
And obedience is not just for us, it's for the whole body of Christ, the church.

One of the most powerful parts of our worship is our *prayer of confession*.
Not every tradition has this.
And I've been asked many times why we need something so negative in worship.
I've been told "*those aren't 'my' sins, so why are we all praying the same words?*"

Well, there's *good reason for confession*,
and the assurance of pardon.
We pray this way because it's *honest*.
It's *who we are*—as fallen, broken, imperfect people.
And no matter what words are spoken, we've been there,
if not in deed, then in thought, or in our hearts.
Because we are all just sinners, in need of God's grace.
The prayer of confession reminds us of that.

In the ancient Hebrew world,
priests would offer confession on behalf of the people.
It wasn't that they themselves had committed every sin confessed,
but that the people as a whole were in need of God's grace.

When we approach the throne of grace,
we *acknowledge that we NEED that grace*,
or we wouldn't be going to God in the first place!

Another aspect of going to the throne is **SACRIFICE**.
Or *letting go and letting God* be in control,
Just like we've been talking about with the receiving the kingdom *like a child*,
Just like *receiving the Holy Spirit's wind* in our sails,
instead of rowing on our own power.

Gray says that *sacrifice is about two things*—
letting go of control (which is like an addiction for most of us)
And *letting go of the need to be comfortable*,
because Jesus made people uncomfortable!
He's still doing it today, right?

She tells a story of a *church sharing space* with a Spanish-speaking church,
and all of the give and take and stress and tension it caused the two churches.
At one point the larger church wanted to let their tenants go find a new home.
But they didn't.
They *decided to sacrifice* for the greater body of Christ.
As one member said, *"These problems do make us uncomfortable.*
They do require extra effort on the part of everyone.
But isn't that a small price to pay for all the blessings we receive from this
relationship?"

Joan Gray, *Sailboat Church*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2014, Pg. 57.

It made me think of our church, and the 10 different addiction recovery groups,
Deeper Life Church, the Spotlight theater, Arcadian Chorale, girl scouts, and other
groups that use our church---sure, it causes tension over time and space,
it would be easier to keep our building to ourselves.
But that would be wrong.
And disobedient.
And definitely not sacrificing for the body of Christ.
The discomfort is nothing compared to the blessing of helping these great groups!

Another part of going to the throne is **DISCERNMENT**.
None of us have wisdom like Christ.

Jesus is the one *who knows who we are, and what we should be doing*—
as individuals, and as a church.

But discerning is not easy, is it?

Gray compares *two different kinds* of leader retreats in churches.

One group gathers to talk and plan the upcoming year,
and they agonize over the low budget, the lack of volunteers,
and how much money they have in the bank.

Nothing much is decided,

except to keep doing what they've always done.

And everyone leaves the retreat *depressed and burned out*.

Another group of leaders gathers to talk about the future,
and they gather with a time of *worship and prayer*,
they give *thanks* for all the blessings and great things
that God made possible.

Then they start a discussion focused on this question:

What is God calling us to do and be in this new year?

They *consider different possibilities and share ideas*

They pray and have Bible study.

They then commit to a weekly prayer time,

alone and with the Pastor about the upcoming year.

At the close of their retreat,

they *dedicate the mission and budget* for the new year

to God in worship and prayer. They left inspired and excited!

Both churches *were short on resources, money, and volunteers*.

But guess which one was sailing?

Guess which one was *approaching the throne of grace with boldness?*

It's kind of like what happened with the *early church in the Book of Acts*.

They didn't have a building, or a budget, or any resources at all!

But that didn't stop them---

they gathered together, to worship, to pray, to listen,

and then to serve the needy, and share the good news!

One day when Peter and John went to the temple
they found a man who couldn't walk, begging them for money.

And you know what Peter did?

Peter said, "*I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.*"

Peter grabbed him by the hand, and the man got up and didn't just walk—he started jumping up and praising God!

What Peter gave that man was ***far more valuable*** than money, right?

What would happen if we acted like that?

What if we didn't focus on the money-in-the-bank?

What if we focused on ***what God could do in and through us***,

Regardless of the resources we can see?

Isn't that our calling?

Isn't that the point of approaching the throne of grace?

Because we ***CAN'T do life*** on our own?

Because we ***NEED God's help***—for absolutely everything?

The question is, ***will we approach the throne***,

And take what God has to give us?

Or will we try to do life and ministry on our own?

Let's go to Jesus—with joy, expectancy, and hope!

Let's ***approach the throne with boldness***---believing, and knowing,

That ***God will give us exactly*** what we need!

For this Good News, all God's people can say together, Amen.