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Pentecost 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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Jesu Juva

“The Greatest Gift”

Text: Luke 10:1-12, 16-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

As you grow up in this world, there are a lot of things you have to *learn*. You have to learn right from wrong. You have to learn how to walk, and dress yourself, and tie your shoes. Then you have to go to school and learn how to read, and write, and do arithmetic. And as you grow older, you learn more. And even after you leave school you learn, and hopefully you do not stop learning all your life. You learn, because you can never know it all. . . . And one of the more unusual things we have to learn about as we grow up is about gifts. Now that may seem like a strange thing to say, but it’s true. For example, when you’re little and you first start receiving gifts it’s great! And when Christmas comes along, your “wish list!” has just about everything on it! But then when you get a little older and begin to learn about the value of gifts, you change. Your list tends to get shorter, but usually more expensive. . . . And the same thing, the same progression, happens once we start giving gifts. We begin by making cards and gifts and giving our parents those Plaster of Paris handprints that we make in school, but then when we get older we start buying presents and buying bigger and more expensive presents.

But then at some point, we learn and begin to realize that it’s not the size or the cost of the present that really matters. And so, for example, if I ask my father where that color television set I bought for my parents when I first started working is today, I know the answer – it broke and got thrown away a long time ago. But if I ask him where that set of Plaster of Paris handprints that I made him in kindergarten are, he’ll go into his dresser and pull them out! Now when I was a teenager, I probably thought that was dumb, or hokey, or something like that. But now, as a parent, I find myself collecting the same things. You learn. You learn that the really big, expensive, spectacular gifts are not always the best gifts, and that the best gifts are sometimes the easiest to overlook and

take for granted.

And so it is in the Holy Gospel that we heard today. We heard there of Jesus sending out His disciples ahead of Him, but the reason He sends them out is *not only* to work – *He sends them that they too may learn*. For in many ways Jesus’ disciples were like little children that still had a whole lot of learning to do, and one of the things they had to learn about were the gifts of God. . . . And so we heard that Jesus sent seventy-two of His disciples out, two by two, and as He does He gives and promises them many gifts. But did you hear, and recognize, what all these gifts were? Or did we perhaps, like the disciples then, underestimate or overlook them.

For first, Jesus says as He sends them out, ***“I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.”*** Now that’s a serious thing, and that should scare them, for Jesus doesn’t even describe them as sheep among wolves, but as *baby* sheep, lambs, among wolves. They’re going as babies – defenseless, vulnerable, weak, and helpless. . . . And yet, they are not harmed. They all return, safe and sound. The wolves have not gotten to them, because of God’s gift – they have been *protected* by their Heavenly Father.

And then second, as Jesus sends them out He says to them, ***“Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals.”*** Take nothing for the journey. And that’s a serious thing, and should scare them, for what will they live on? How will they take care of themselves? They will be vulnerable, and in need, and at risk. . . . And yet, they lack nothing. They all return safe and sound, having had all that they needed given to them, because of God’s gift – they have been *provided for* by their Heavenly Father.

And then finally as Jesus sends these seventy-two out, He gives them authority – His authority – over sicknesses and demons, and they are to use this authority to help people. And they do, and this gift *they notice*! Isn’t this the greatest gift of all! For when they returned, they tell Jesus, ***“Wow! It worked! Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your Name!”*** . . . And as you heard this reading – be honest! – isn’t that what caught your attention as well? The really big gift! The really spectacular gift! And wouldn’t we like to have that gift and that ability today as well?!

And so Jesus needs to teach them about the gifts of God. He needs to teach us about the gifts of God. And so He responds, ***“Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”*** And it’s just like my father pulling out those old Plaster of Paris handprints! For what’s really important here? What good would it be if the disciples drove out demons, but that’s all they did? What good would it be if the disciples healed sicknesses and diseases, but that’s all they did? They would simply be releasing people from one slavery so they could go be slaves to

something else! To something else much more devastating. Slaves to sin, which leads not simply to physical death, but to eternal death. And what kind of gift would that be? Quite literally, helping people out of the frying pan and into the fire!

And sometimes this is what happens to us as well. We focus on the wrong kinds of gifts. We ask God for all kinds of things and all kinds of gifts, but what if He gave them to us? . . . And do we overlook or forget about the gifts that He *does* give us everyday? His protection, His provision, His guidance, His peace, His unlimited forgiveness. . . . And do we realize that the greatest gift of all is that our names are written in heaven?

When those seventy-two disciples came back to Jesus, they rejoiced and were excited that ***“even demons are subject to us in Your Name!”*** But you know what Jesus said in response to that? Really, He said, ***“Big deal!”*** Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus, as the eternal Son of God created the heavens and the earth. He was there when Satan was *expelled* from heaven, as He saw ***“Satan fall like lightning from heaven.”*** They may have authority over spirits and demons, but He has authority over Satan himself! So why are they rejoicing over this? . . . Do they like this authority? Do they like this gift? Do they like this power? Then they should use it as Jesus did – to serve, and to lay down their lives for others. For all of Jesus’ authority and power would have done no good at all had He not also laid down His life. That was the big deal. Many looked at Him on the cross and mocked Him, and challenged Him to do something *really* spectacular, like jump down from there and wipe out all His foes! But in looking for the spectacular, they were overlooking the greatest gift of all. That because Jesus willingly stayed on the cross, and shed His blood and died for us, our sins are taken away, and our names are written in heaven.

And today, this is what is happening as Jesus works through His Church. It may not always look spectacular, but don’t be fooled. In the waters of Holy Baptism, our names are written in Heaven. We are given the gifts of the Spirit, faith and forgiveness and are adopted as children of God. In the bread and wine of Holy Communion, our Lord is feeding us and strengthening us as we eat and drink His own body and blood. We are forgiven and restored, protected and provided for. In the Word of God that we hear and read, in Church and at home, we are being taught by God, drawn to Him, strengthened in faith and trust, and raised as children of our Heavenly Father. And yes, the world may look at these things and see only Plaster of Paris handprints! Gifts that *look* weak and even dumb, not big and spectacular. But these are, in reality, the greatest gifts. Through these Jesus is still working, for as He told His disciples, ***“the one who hears you hears me.”*** Through these Satan is still falling and being defeated. Through these the sin-sick are still being healed and restored. Through these, we are being given a kingdom. So rejoice, Jesus says, *in these*. In what really matters. For the things of this world will

come and go, and often do. But the gifts of God are both for here, and for eternity.

And knowing that helps us to put everything else in perspective. It helps you prioritize your life and understand what's really important, and what's not so important. And it helps as we now go out into the world. For though you may not have been called to be a pastor or a missionary or some other so-called "big, visible person" in the church, do not overlook or underestimate the gifts that God gives through you. As you spend time with a neighbor in need; as you pray for God to send laborers into the harvest; as you encourage and speak God's Word to those who are struggling; as you visit those who are shut-in or lonely; as you gather in this house with your fellow believers; as you bear one another's burdens; as you defend those who cannot speak for themselves; as you raise your children in the faith; as you sow the seeds of God's Word as you have opportunity. . . . Big, spectacular victories are nice. But God's work and gifts are often given through the handprints of His children, in small ways, in small churches, in small victories.

But it will not always be so. For the spectacular is coming. The spectacular came for Jesus not in a big show of jumping down from and avoiding the cross, but in going through the cross, when He rose from the dead on Easter morning. That is what mattered. . . . And know that the spectacular is coming for us too, when we will be raised from the dead to live with our God and Saviour in Heaven forever! For that is what matters most to God. Not whether we have all that we want here and now, but that we will be with Him forever. And so the gifts that He gives us here and now are all given to serve that one greatest gift of all, to give us eternal life. And so He gives us His protection and provision. He gives us our parents and teachers. He gives us Churches and His baptism and Supper. He gives us His Word and forgiveness. He gives us His discipline and correction, and if He gives us hardships and struggles – *those too are gifts*. For while now they may not seem like much, and may not even seem like gifts at all, one day we will understand and realize what these gifts were really all about, and how important and valuable they really were to us. For *as children* – children of God – we may not realize it now, but we will. For just as my father can still pull out those Plaster of Paris handprints from His dresser, so our Heavenly Father has a pretty special pair of handprints from His Son as well – the ones with the nail-prints in the middle! And from those hands and from that blood, come for us the true reason to rejoice – that by those hands and by that blood ***"our names written in heaven."***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

