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Pentecost 12

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Kingdom for Sinners”

Text: Luke 12:32-40

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

“Sell your possessions, and give to the needy.” Thus said Jesus to His disciples then, and to us, His disciples today.

Those words are a challenge; a test. To get us to examine our hearts. Do we have the faith to actually do this? Do we have the compassion to even *want* to do this? The answer to both those questions is: probably not.

Our world today, of which we are a part, places a great deal of importance on *things*. Nice, big homes; new cars; faster computers and internet connections; high-tech gadgets; clothes; home furnishings; and the list goes on and on. *Those things are not bad* – unless they become what our heart clings to instead of God. Unless these things become our life and define who we are instead of God. Unless we’d be more willing to give up God than to give up these things. That is the test Jesus is laying before us disciples today. Where is your heart?

One of my children’s favorite TV shows right now is called “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.” Perhaps you’ve seen it. A group of interior designers picks a family who’ve had some difficulties or struggles or some problems in their life and, basically, gives them a new home. They send the family on a vacation, then they go in and gut the whole place, and then rebuild it again, all in one week. It’s a fun show, and the homes usually turn out pretty beautiful and amazing. . . . But one thing about that show that strikes me is how often the returning family, gawking in amazement at their new house, will say things like, “You’ve given us our life back.” “Now I can live again.” Or, “You’ve made us a family again.” Can a *house* and some new furniture really do that? I wonder what happens when the TV cameras go away, and life’s problems come back? Or what happens to these folks when a hurricane comes across Florida, or a wildfire rushes down a California mountain, or a tornado descends upon the Midwestern town they live in? Would they give it up for their neighbor?

The truth is that sometimes we think along these same lines. That the *things* of this life can give us the life and joy and happiness we're seeking, and so we're reluctant to give them up. But can they? . . . What is most important to you? Where is your hope? Where is your faith? These are important questions.

But just as important as the first question: Do we have the faith to do this? – is the second question: Do we have the compassion to *even want* to do this? And this second question is perhaps more convicting than the first. For while we can attribute a negative answer to the first to our weakness, the second is not so easily dismissed. For the opposite of being compassionate, is what? To be calloused; suspicious; arrogant; uncaring; selfish. To be called weak of faith is one thing – *that* we probably don't mind, although we should. But to be considered these other things – calloused, suspicious, arrogant, uncaring, selfish – that's not me, is it? But it is. For I don't even have to sell my possessions – there are a lot of people I don't help already having the money in my pocket! There are people I don't help when it doesn't cost me a dime – when all it would cost is a little bit of time! There are people I don't help because, quite frankly, I would rather sit in front of my TV, or my computer, or in my nice house, and not be bothered.

Where is your heart? Jesus gives this test to us today not because He wants to find out – He already knows! But so that we might realize our sin; our misplaced faith; our lack of love for our neighbor. That we see that no matter how good we think we are, that we are failures. We don't have to go through all the commandments to determine that. Jesus cuts right to the chase here. With this simple question of faith and love. Where is your heart? What can't you live without? What are you making your neighbor live without? And why?

These are hard words. For pastors, too. I have written only what I have seen within my own heart. I'm sure all of you could add to all of this as well.

So what is the answer? Well, I can tell you what the answer is not – it is not for all of you to sit there today and resolve to do better. That's what you were thinking, right? I know, because that's what I was thinking! We need to dump our stock in earthly things in order to gain heavenly dividends. I'll find the courage to take risks. I need to not be so selfish. I need to sell some of my things that I haven't used in a while. I need to get rid of these things I put my faith in. I need to get better! . . . You know, that's what many people in the Middle Ages did. They became monks and nuns. They sold all their possessions. They lived destitute lives. They suffered in this life in order (they thought) to gain the next. . . . But you already know what will happen if you try to do this. You will fail even as you have failed. Our faith will fail. Our love and compassion will fail. We'll either become proud of our progress, or angry that God is making us do it. We'll either

love ourselves for our compassion, our hate our neighbor for needing our love. And you know what that means? It means that as sinners, we're damned if we do; and damned if we don't.

So that's not the answer. For Jesus doesn't want you to feel guilty for having some nice things and pleasures in this life – He's the one that gave it all to you anyway! And He wants you to have those things and to enjoy life, but to know that those things are not your life. You *could* live without them. Maybe you *should*. But the ownership is not the problem – our misplaced faith is the problem. And so the answer is not to get rid of those things we're putting our faith in – for there will always be something else! – the answer is a change of heart. And that's something only God can do.

And so the answer to our lack of faith is not for us to work on our faith, but for us to hear the Word and promises of God. The answer to our lack of compassion is not to force ourselves to be compassionate, but for us to see and receive the compassion of God. The answer is to know that we are failures, and rather than trying to fix ourselves, to come to God and repent. To fall at the feet of our Saviour and receive all that He has promised to give us. For He doesn't say: *come when you got something for me*; or, *come when you start doin' a little better*. He says: come and repent. He says, ***“Stop being afraid . . . for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”***

Did you hear that? That promise? That promise that came before Jesus' test of heart? **The Father has given you His kingdom.** You who lack faith. You who put your trust in the things of this world. You who love yourself more than your neighbor. You who have failed to do even the littlest things that God demands! **The Father has given you His kingdom.** . . . And we think: that's not right! But it is. That is exactly what has happened. And we think: that's not right! We don't deserve that; we haven't earned it. . . . Exactly! You haven't. It is a gift. Because your Heavenly Father knows that commands can't change a heart. And more commands aren't going to change you. Only His love can do that. And so God gives you His love. The Father sends His Son to die on the cross for your sin and failure. The Son willing comes and ascends the cross in your place, and pleads ***“Father, forgive them.”*** And the Holy Spirit comes and gives you the gift of faith to believe this is true, and to receive this kingdom provided for you by God's death and resurrection. And this all before you have done anything. While you were still dead in your sins.

And is this not what we see still today? God gives His kingdom in Holy Baptism to babies who haven't done anything for Him. God gives His kingdom in Holy Communion to us who come to His altar with nothing to offer Him but our sins. God gives His kingdom in His Word to us who have trouble believing that it is true. But our lack of

faith *does* not and cannot stop His promises – it is rather His promises that give us the faith that we lack. As we prayed in the collect earlier, He is “*always more ready to hear than we to pray and always ready to give more than we either desire or deserve.*” We sang in the Introit that “*you open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.*” We see on the cross – and on the altar – that God gives us His Son. And if He gives us His own Son, what else would He possibly withhold from us? And so the forgiveness that we need, the life that we need, the salvation that we need, all has been provided. Through the cross and resurrection. Through the Word and Sacraments. Through the promises of God. All is here, and all is yours.

And so, Jesus says, “***Stop being afraid.***” Stop being afraid to let go of the things of this world. Stop being afraid to repent. Stop being afraid, “***For it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.***” That promise, and the cross that lies behind it, is what makes the difference in your life. In fact, this is our *starting point*. That God has given me – ME! – an undeserving, no good, selfish, lazy, doubting, sinner, His kingdom. He sent His Son for me. He forgives me. He loves me, even though others don’t; even though I may not even love myself. He does. And He has given me His kingdom. No matter what I have or don’t have in this life; no matter what happens – that’s the fact. That’s His promise. That is the basis for my life. And therefore whatever I do, I do not to get this kingdom, but because it’s already mine!

And knowing that, do you know what will then happen? As you hear that promise, and receive that promise, over and over again, you will also begin to live that promise. Not because you have to, but because that’s who you are. For that is where your heart, your faith, will be. Not in yourself, or the things of this world, but in a promise too good to be true – but which is true! . . . And then you will be ready, as we heard in the Holy Gospel. Ready for the Son of Man to return, whenever that will be. Ready to leave this world and enter the next, not leaving what you treasure, but receiving it – finally and fully.

So “***Stop being afraid, little flock. Your Father has given you the kingdom.***”

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.