

21 September 2008
Pentecost 19

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Called to Life”

Text: Matthew 20:1-16 (Isaiah 55:6-9)

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

Where do you tend to focus most of your attention: is it on those things that you do have, or is it on what you don't have?

If you're like most people, it is on what you don't have. We do it with **things**, like cell phones, and TVs, and computers, and cars. Yes, what I have is fine, but I'd *really* be happier if I had one of those new, fancy ones! We do it with **people**. We have friends, but maybe not the right friends, the ones that can get us ahead or get us accepted in the right crowds. Or yes, I have a good spouse, but why can't he or she be more like . . . them? And sometimes we even do it with **churches**. Pastors especially fall into this trap. Why can't my church be more like that church, with a nice building, a nice organ, or with no problems or issues?

Now sometimes, wanting something nicer or newer isn't wrong. (Spouses excluded!) The problem is the mindset. For focusing so frequently on what we don't have instead of what we do leads to discontent and grumbling. And so instead of rejoicing in the goodness and generosity of my heavenly Father who has so abundantly blessed me and given me so much, *we become like the workers in the parable told us by Jesus today*. We look at what others have been given and get upset, and jealous, and even angry. At both them and God. And then not only does our love for our neighbor fail, so does our faith in God, as we accuse Him of not being fair, or not giving us our due.

It is tempting to blame advertising or the entertainment industry or even the government which sent us rebate checks to go and spend this summer for feeding our appetites for more - but its not their fault. They are simply *feeding* what is already there in us. The mindset created by satan from the very beginning when he got Adam and Eve to be dissatisfied with Paradise (!), and instead of focusing on all that they had given, to focus on the one and only thing God had not given them to eat. And they said: *that's not right. God is wrong*. And in their sinful self-absorption took what was not good for them. And we have been following in their footsteps ever since.

For how happy were those fellows called to work in the vineyard at the beginning of the day. How happy to have good and useful labor to do. How happy to have the promise of a day's pay at the end, and go home with the satisfaction of a job well done. How happy they were . . . *until* the master had to screw it up by hiring more laborers later in the day, and then having the audacity to pay them exactly the same at the end of the day! And suddenly all happiness and contentment flew out the windows of their souls, as they thought: *that's not right. The master is wrong.*

But it is with the Lord as Isaiah told us: ***“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.”*** That is so because the Lord does not operate by the rules and ways of the world. For the rules and ways of the world are of the Law - getting what you deserve and what you've earned; but the way of the Lord is of the Gospel - the way of gift and grace. And in this way the Lord is exceedingly gracious and abundant, begrudging none His gifts, but always giving and giving more.

And honestly, we sometimes - or often times! - have a problem with that, don't we? And not just on the physical side of things, but on the spiritual side. And I'll use an example I've used from this pulpit before, and that is death bed conversions. For when a criminal who has done all kinds of evil things in his life confesses Christ right before the death-inducing drugs are injected into his veins, what do we often think? *Isn't that convenient?* Does he think a lifetime of evil can be made up for so easily at the end? And if we're told that that person, who was called by our Lord to His vineyard at the last *minute* of the day will receive the very same gift of heaven as we, many of us who have been in the vineyard all the day, all our lives . . . well . . . no. We don't like it. Not one bit. *That's not right. God is wrong.*

To which Jesus answers us today: ***“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”***

And so we need to repent. To repent of our wrong thinking and our rejecting the gifts of God. Yes, *our* rejecting. For if we think someone does not deserve the gift of God, then we are thinking that we do, and we have turned the gifts of God into obligations - what I've earned, and therefore what He owes me. Or at least that He owes me more than what He should give them.

But what does God owe us? Really? For are we not the lifelong criminals deserving of death? Or maybe we are even worse, for we should know better. We who are here, receiving our Lord's Word and forgiveness every week, yet still going out and living the same old criminal life of sin? Our anger unabated, our lusts insatiable, our pride overflowing, our care and concern focused mostly on ourselves, and our love for others running cold, except when we think we can get something from them. What exactly do we think God owes us?

And so that criminal, strapped to the gurney by the bands and locks of the Law, awaiting that lethal injection - well, there's a room full right here. And every week we come here and have a death bed conversion. For every conversion is a death bed conversion. All repentance is done from the death bed of sin. And so we plead: **Have mercy on me, Jesus, a poor, miserable sinner.** Do not give me what I deserve, but what I don't deserve. Forgive me and give me the gift of eternal life, instead of the wages of eternal death that I've earned.

And our Lord Jesus, who does not give as we give, *does*. He loosens the shackles of sin and death that hold us fast and sets us free. And He can - not because it is easy for Him - but because He fed the hungry, gaping jaws of death with His own flesh and blood and life. He allowed Himself to be not strapped, but *nailed* to the gurney of death called the cross, and receive our death sentence for us. That His death mean life for us. That His condemnation mean forgiveness for us. That by His drinking the lethal cup of God's justice and wrath against sin *for us*, we might not get what we deserve, but exactly what we don't.

And so now the cup that is given us to drink is not a cup of death, but a cup of life. A cup filled not with the lethal cocktail of God's justice and wrath, but filled with the blood of Jesus, the blood of forgiveness and life. For the blood that fills the cup we are given here is not the blood of the dead but the blood of the living. The blood of the One who is risen from the dead, having defeated sin and satan, death and the grave, and who now lives to give us His life. Life in the forgiveness of our sins. Lavishly, generously, and abundantly. For that is why Jesus came, and for no other reason. He came that we might have life - life from the dead! - and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

And if Jesus has given us that gift, can we begrudge it to another? *And is Jesus really being more generous with them than with us?* Than with us who have received the washing of forgiveness and the adoption as sons in Holy Baptism? Than with us who have received His lavish and abundant forgiveness here all our lives? Than with us who have feasted on our Lord's body and blood year upon year? Than with us who have been given a life of faith, hope, and love? Than with us who have lived in the pasture of the Good Shepherd and in the safety and security of His fold? Than with us who have had the privilege of prayer and the confidence of our Lord's promises? Than with us who through the benefit of God's Word see the hand of our Lord at work in this world? Than with us who are able to come to our Lord's house every week and be with Him? Do we really think those who come at the end are receiving *more* than us? What more could Jesus give us than He has already given us?

No. There is nothing your Lord is withholding from you. All that He is and all that

He has is yours in your Saviour Jesus Christ. He simply bids you to come. Early or late, young or old. Come and receive His gifts. Come and rejoice in His goodness and generosity. Come in good times and bad times. Come, for Jesus is calling you. Calling you to His life. So come. Come and live.

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.