

19 November 2023
The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Gifts from a Loving, Trusting Father”
Text: Matthew 25:14-30

(Many of the thoughts and phrases in this sermon adapted from Norman Nagel in *Selected Sermons of Norman Nagel*, (c) 2004 CPH, p. 251-55.)

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

Trusting is risky. It is much safer and shrewder to trust no one. Then you can't be disappointed when you are let down or betrayed. Don't open yourself up to heartache and hurt. But to close yourself off in such a way is not good. And to live in such fear and paranoia is, in fact, not living at all - but is, I would say, the very opposite: dying. So once bitten, twice shy, is not the way of it with a living God.

So as we heard in the Holy Gospel today, God shares with us, and trusts. And He began by sharing His *life* with us, entrusting to us His creation. The perfect world He created He gives to His man and woman, for them to have dominion over it, to care for it as He does. **He trusts them.** And, well, you know how that turned out. But even then, God does not take this dominion away from them. It would not be as it once was. Sin has its consequences. But they still had His creation, and He still loved them, though some would call that foolish, indeed.

But then there's more. In sharing His life with us, God also shared His creating with us, with a man who begets and a woman who conceives. They become a father and a mother, and we become a son or a daughter. The marvelous miracle of life. Except when men who father aren't fathers at all, but abandon or turn against their children. Or women who sacrifice their children to career, freedom, or fear. But still this gift remains to us, of children and family. Though why God would entrust this to us still, only He knows. *Trusting is risky.*

But though we make a mess of things, all is not doom and gloom. Most parents love their children and try to raise them well. But as any parent will tell you, this is more art than science! Every child is different, and wonderfully so. How utterly boring it would be if we were all the same. And so parents do not treat their children who are not the same, all the same. That would be abuse, not love. To each is given according to their ability, their temperament, their maturity and growth. To some five, to some two, to some one. So they may grow. So they may learn. Perhaps there will be a mess. *Trusting is risky.* But there is

also joy, and the possibility of *great* joy, when parents see their children using what has been given, and growing and abounding.

And so, as we heard, have we received from our *heavenly* Father. Gifts. Not all the same, nor in the same measure. For we are not all the same. So to some five, to some two, to some one. All we are and have from Him. He entrusts us with gifts and talents and abilities to use and enjoy, and to show Him what we've made of them. Not because He is demanding a certain return on His investment. God's gifts are not a business transaction; He doesn't need profits! They are given in love. To give joy to the receiver and joy to the Giver. Our heavenly Father pours out, and then pours out more.

But what happens? Instead of joy, why do God's gifts, at times, breed discontent and grumbling in us? Why, if I receive five, am I pleased and proud, yet if I receive one I have gotten a raw deal? Why am I jealous of God's bounty to others, or quick to find fault? I deserve more. God isn't fair. He *is a hard man*. Then God is no longer Giver, but *withholder*. That's the lie satan sold to Eve in the Garden, and the lie he's been peddling ever since. His gifts are not good enough. Take what's yours! Take what you need. Rebellious children, we are, by no fault of God. **That's what happens when we measure the Giver by the gifts, and not the gifts by the Giver.** Then there is turning away from God, then turning against God, until finally *the weeping and gnashing of teeth* that we do now, is the weeping and gnashing of teeth we will do for eternity.

But that is not what God wants. So still He gives. In the beginning, in response to His children's rebellion, what did He do? In response to their belief that He was withholding from them, that His gifts not good enough, what did He do? **He gave them even more.** He gave them the promise of a gift greater than they could imagine: not five, not two, **but His one and only Son** to save them from their rebellion, to save them from their unbelief, to save them from their turning away, to die for us on the tree of the cross. He would not stop loving them. And He will not stop loving you. Why? Only He knows. Such love is beyond our understanding.

But this gift, too, was received by many not with joy, but with disappointment. Not what we had in mind. Not the gift we're looking for. They wanted salvation from Rome, not sin. What is it for you? Earthly riches, not heavenly riches! An earthly kingdom, not a heavenly one! Career, not family. Ease, not work Glory now, not later. *Five*, not two or one! God's not doing it right! Not giving me what I want! **But when you look at what you have not, there is no joy in what you have been given.** God, then, is a hard man. A withholder, not a giver. Not to be trusted. Or loved.

But with that, it is not God who is hard, it is our hearts. He has given us the gift we need above all others. **And this gift for all of us the same.** For in this we are all the same. As Paul said: *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:22-23a). And so the gift of life - *for all!* - He gives in His Son. Resurrection from

the dead. The forgiveness of our sins . . . and rebellion, and dissatisfaction, and accusations. A bloody and dead man on a cross may not look like much of a gift from much of a God, but a God who would do this for us - when that should be us! - that's a gift of far greater value than we can know.

And so it is also with the gifts we are given here. Can't you do better than this, God? Better than a splash of water, some words, and a bit of bread and wine? Not much of a gift from not much of a God. We can get more and better somewhere else - *anywhere* else! **But don't judge the Giver from the gifts - judge the gifts from the Giver.** That here is the life, the forgiveness, the water, the blood, that flows from the cross. That you have a new life and live a new life. A Christ life. Not that you will be Christ, or Jesus, a Saviour. God doesn't want that. God doesn't want a whole lot of Jesuses. He has one of those, and one is enough. What He wants is one of you. That's why He made you. That's why He redeemed you. That's why He gives to you. That's why He entrusts to you.

Whether you receive five or two or one is not a measure of your worth. What you are worth is the life of the Father's Son! That already gives you infinite value and worth.

Our world today says we're all the same, and even more than that, we're interchangeable. It doesn't matter who you are, a man or a woman, who you marry, or what you do. **But that is a loveless world**, an abusive world, a sinful world. Because we're not all the same, *and that's good*. And our heavenly Father doesn't treat us all the same, *and that's good*. He loves us as He made us, uniquely and different. So for some five, for some two, for some one, that we may grow and live in joy and peace. Children of a Father who loves us enough to not treat us all the same.

That's what God has up His divine sleeve here, **that we simply be who He created us to be**. We don't have to be anything more to please Him or delight Him. So whether you are a doctor or a laborer, a child or an adult, a man or a woman, delight in that and in the gifts your Father gives. Gifts that He won't stop giving. To some more, to some less, but all uniquely right. For again, as the apostle Paul said, *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things* (Romans 8:32)?

Graciously . . . and trustingly. For still the gifts He gives we may abuse and misuse. And we do. Sexuality, marriage, possessions, power, life. We think them ours to do with as we will, not as He will. We *think* for our good, but how often this turns out not for good at all. For this we need to repent, but not just repent, but receive the gift of forgiveness. Which is to turn to our Father and Saviour, and in confessing, **trust Him!** Which is not risky at all! For, as always, He will not deal with us in wrath, but in love. And, as always, He will not withhold from us, but give us even more. That instead of there being weeping in sorrow we will cry tears of joy, and instead of teeth that gnash we will have teeth that feast. That feast *now* on the Body and Blood of our Saviour, and that will feast *eternally*

when our Saviour comes again, to take us home.

For that is what our heavenly Father wants. That is why He gives, and trusts. It's not about whether you receive five or two or one, or return five or two or one, but that you have His joy now and enter into His joy forever. That you know Him as the good and perfect Giver, your good and perfect Father, who loves you unlike any other.

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.