

**The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost • October 2, 2011**

*St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA*

*Rev. Braun Campbell*

Philippians 3:13-14

*"Why Give?: The Seven Gifts of Christ"*

Mazin is our "UPS guy" at St. John's. He comes by the church office to deliver packages for the church office and ECEC, unloading them off of his big, brown truck at least a couple of times a week. The worship bulletins and newsletters that you use each week were most likely delivered by Mazin pretty recently: we use a whole lot of paper in our life together as a congregation! Study books and Bibles and cleaning supplies and ESL materials – Mazin keeps delivering what we need to do the work we do together as a congregation. Over the years, we've gotten to know a little bit about him, hearing updates on his wife and little baby as he rolls his hand truck in and out of our doors. And while we're glad to see Mazin as a person, it's his role as a UPS driver and the packages that he delivers that keep bringing him back to St. John's. He comes so often that it's usually a little bit of a mystery as to just what he'll be leaving with us. On occasion, I've walked out to Mazin's truck when he's got a big delivery for the church. Looking inside, I've seen the rows and rows of shelves, all piled high with items to be delivered to their designated destinations. Sometimes, the floor of the truck is so full that he's got to shift boxes around to get to our packages. But at the end of his run, Mazin's truck is usually empty. If there are any stragglers, they'll be held at the UPS distribution center for the next run out to their addressees. The boxes aren't meant to stay in the truck: they're meant to be delivered. God's gifts are meant to be delivered, too.

While they don't usually come in a big, brown truck, we Lutheran Christians enjoy a heritage that reminds us that God delivers His good gifts to us more often than we might realize. At St. John's, our mission statement reminds us that we are gathered around the cross of Christ Jesus. Gathered around that cross, we share God's Word and His Sacraments as His people. Baptism and Holy Communion, we say, are the "means of grace," ways in which God is delivering His gifts of forgiveness, new life, and strength. You and I need what God is delivering in order to do the work that we do together as a congregation; without God's grace, we can't be what we're meant to be. You won't have the strength to press on to what lies ahead. If you're wondering about how often you should come to the Lord's Supper, think of it this way: how often does Mazin need to fill up his big, brown truck? As often as he can! Without cargo to deliver, the UPS driver can't do what he's meant to do. And without fuel, neither he nor his cargo would reach their destination. You need the gifts that God delivers, but so does the world around you.

Last week, Pastor Meehan introduced our fall stewardship focus with a key point from the *Why Give?* devotional booklet: you who are reborn in Jesus Christ are rivers, not lakes. You aren't meant to exist just for yourself, sitting around only to take in and retain; rather, the new life that you have in Jesus is a life that flows out to the world around you. And like a river, you have a course to run. Writing to the Philippians, St. Paul points us ahead to the ultimate goal in the Christian's life. We're looking on to being in our Creator's presence and knowing life with Him, something of which we get a glimpse – a foretaste – in the Lord's Supper. But we're not there yet, as Paul wasn't. The Greek word that he uses here in verse 14 (σκοπός) has the sense of a "finish line." Getting to the finish line isn't easy. But just as a river gets its strength from the source that feeds it, God made Christ your source when you were baptized. His gifts flow into you and through you.

I suppose that one of the dangers of any stewardship focus is that you can start thinking solely in terms of what you've got; what are your material and immaterial resources and how you might put those to use. But if you've been following along with us at St. John's and spending time reading the *Why Give?* devotional each day, you'll have seen that this week's readings help you to better understand a striking reason behind your stewardship as a Christian: when you give from what

you've got with Christ Jesus as your source, you are giving more than just your time, energy, or financial resources. God works through you to give Christ's gifts others even as you give.

When you give as a follower of Christ, you give the **presence** of Christ. You are an ambassador of Jesus. Giving as a believer, you are connecting the recipient of your gift to the Creator of the universe in a personal way as your source, Jesus, flows into their life, too. You represent him to the other person: he works through you. Your face is the mask through which God is relating to another human being in a personal manner.

When you give as a follower of Christ, you give the **power** of Christ. All too often, we fail to appreciate all the prisons in which the devil, the world, and our own sinful hearts and minds trap people. And yet, such prisons abound. Jesus went to the cross to win freedom from all those forces that would separate us from God. His power breaks into the world as he works through the "royal priesthood" of his people – disciples like you – to transform lives and break Satan's chains for those who were once held captive by the forces of evil.

When you give as a follower of Christ, you give the **provision** of Christ. This might be the most obvious of the gifts that God gives through your giving. As you share the resources that God has entrusted to you, God is providing for the needs of others. Sometimes that might take the form of canned goods, as when we have "Share Sunday" at the beginning of each month to help stock our local food pantry. His provision may be the shoulder and attentive ear that you lend to your friend who's facing hard times in life. And His provision goes out to others as you serve in your vocations at work or home or school as Christ serves your neighbor through you.

When you give as a follower of Christ, you give the **perfection** of Christ. As one who has been connected to the forgiveness that comes from Jesus' cross, God the Father looks on you and sees only Jesus' perfection. He has washed away your faults and failings. Forgiven and restored to relationship with God, you can share your story with another who struggles with all the guilt and fear that would keep them apart from God. He can wash them clean, too.

When you give as a follower of Christ, you give the pledge of the **resurrection** of Christ. Death is a harsh reminder of just how powerless we are in this broken world, where loved ones may be ripped away from us at any time. As you give, though, you share the hope and solace that we have in our living Lord, looking ahead with St. Paul to what waits ahead of us in Christ, life that death will never overcome.

When you give as a follower of Christ, you give the comfort of the eternal **reign** of Christ. As Christians, we believe that our Lord is "*above all rule and authority and power and dominion*" (Eph. 1:21); Jesus is supreme. Whatever may come in this life, nothing can separate you from him, nothing can cut you off from your source. Christ's eternal reign continues to show itself in the world through you, His people. Your giving, then, calls others to know the same comfort that you have: Jesus reigns, and since he is the ultimate authority, he is our ultimate hope!

When you give as a follower of Christ, you give the assurance of the **return** of Christ. We look ahead to that day when God will end the separation between heaven and earth, removing all brokenness and evil and want. That is the finish line. That is the ultimate destination for God's people. But even so, it is not our end. Christian giving points to that time beyond time when no one will need, yet everyone will still give, living as rivers of God's overflowing love.

St. Paul might not put it in these exact words, but when you follow Jesus, you're like God's UPS to the world. Regardless of because of who you've been or what you've done, God has brought you on board, restocking you and refueling you for your journey through life. You have a destination, pressing on to the goal that lies ahead. Like Mazin and his big, brown truck, you've been sent out to deliver at stops all along the way. Why give? You're giving the gifts of Christ!

Amen.