

Is 55. Rom 9. Matt 14

Very few things in life are free. And if they are free, and they are good, and people actually believe it, well, you better get in line because there is gonna be a crowd, no?

Well I don't know if you have figured this out but free stuff is offered here, folks. Yes, we have a plate, but I don't care what you put in it. Yes, stewardship is a part of the Christian life, but do not get it twisted, that is not the prerequisite for the gifts of God and it never has been and it never will be. God's gifts, for you, are free. But don't confuse that with cheap. A very, very high price was paid to get you the gifts of God, the life of the sinless Son of God, his blood poured out. That is a high price. But it was paid, willingly, that you might receive the gifts free of charge.

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and you labor for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

You chase after all that perishes: that car, that account, that body image, that ideology. It will die. And you work so hard for it, you debate to such great lengths, you spend so much stress on it. And it will die. And God says “I have free gifts!

The water of life, the bread of life. That you may never die.” And we say, “Oh that’s OK I guess.” What!?

In our Gospel reading, Jesus withdraws after his cousin John the baptizer is killed, and the black Friday crowds follow, anxious, desperate for free stuff. For healing. And we see the people on street-corners as eyesores, but Jesus looks at these people who intrude on his grief and he has compassion. Such is his patience and mercy.

And so he gives them what they need for free out of his abundance. And then he teaches them. And then he feeds them. But don’t miss the pickle he puts the disciples in? Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” “Over five thousand people, just feed them real quick.” What? They can’t. And we can’t despite our best programs. So who then is, and has to be, the ultimate giver of free gifts and gifts that last? Jesus. There is simply no other option.

And so we gather around those gifts here. Gifts of forgiveness, gifts of meaning, gifts of value, gifts of salvation – gifts that last in Word and Water and Bread and Wine – gifts from Jesus. And we are free from the silly games of trying to earn it, which would be more impossible than giving 5000 a meal from 5 loaves and 2 fish. God’s gifts are free. Really, truly. No strings. An open invitation to you, just as you

are. The account is full, it is overflowing, filled up by the priceless inheritance of the blood of Jesus.

Now I suppose I could say the catch is: “be careful, these gifts may change you!” It may change those priorities, it may change that heart, it may bring you to follow after a King who will march different than the world. But make no mistake the gifts come before the march, they are not earned by it. Salvation is free. And folks that is good news. Take it! And rejoice.

And we, in the pews today might say “Amen” to that. But as we rejoice in the eternal gifts of God, isn’t it fair to wonder, if this gift is free and it is so good, well, “where’s everybody else at?” Right? If all this is true, If the Lord has laid out an abundant table for the world, if the gifts are lasting and eternal. Then where are the crowds? Why in the world are there people NOT here?

And if we are really honest about ourselves and our motivations maybe a cloud of doubt comes into our minds. Why are you, Christian, so wishy washy about this stuff. And why aren’t you dancing out of here and all week long? Why is it so much easier to sleep, or read the news, than hear the gifts of God? Why don’t they change our hearts and lives as dramatically as it seems they should? Why are we yawning instead of engaged and excited to hear God’s Word? Why are we at home full of bitterness and greed and lust instead of the fruits of the Spirit?

What is going on? Why do some refuse the free and abundant life-giving gifts of God?

This is our epistle lesson. Paul mourns this reality, as if we didn't know it was a reality, in Romans 9 through 11 and let me tell you, if you want to explore those chapters first, as Luther says, you better know chapters 1-8 real well, and then, well, buckle up.

In our reading today he mourns the reality that many of his Jewish brothers and sisters deny that Jesus is the Messiah and therefore deny the gifts and benefits that are laid out abundantly for them. And it is more bitter because they were the people through whom he came!

And here we sit with friends and loved ones who reject the free and abundant gifts. And we pray, knowing it's God's will to save, but it doesn't seem to be working!

And so the first question I think is – why... why do people reject the abundant gifts? Well I might ask, why do you drag your feet regarding his gifts sometimes? You who do confess how good they are. And it's for the same reason we don't capitalize on any other free thing in life: we have lost sight of the goodness, we are just so busy, we find shinier things, we doubt their reality or effectiveness. We carry doubt, fear, and sin and for so many complex reasons sabotage our relationship with God. It's all that.

It's the difficult teaching of Jesus that we refuse. These crowds receive abundant gifts from Jesus, but when he stops offering the bread and healings suddenly, they are less interested. When he teaches the truths of the kingdom they aren't as interested. They stop following. And we are the same, those teachings of the king "well that's not very modern, or politically correct, so I guess he can't be the Good King afterall." And so the abundant gifts come with abundant truth that is good for us, and the sociology shows it, but we say "no thanks" to that side dish. And so the abundance is denied.

And, it's all our fault. We see this in scripture with the shipwrecked faith, with the hardening of our own hearts, with our own cursed free will and it's choosing the things of the world over the things of God.

And it's a shame, it really is. Two of our readings today speak of the wonderful abundance that God offers for free, and that middle one, man, talks of the reality that it is denied. The medicine is there, the sick refuse to take it.

And so the remedy then is what? For us to be smarter, for us to buck up? For us to try harder? Well interestingly enough the scriptures are clear that that actually isn't it. The remedy is more of God, working in us, to call us. The remedy is yet again, the gifts of God for us.

Remember how it all starts, with his feast, his gifts, and his invitation. He calls us. Come and eat! And its clear that our being saved, our believing, is his work, “by grace through faith that no one can boast.” Even as it is clear that the invitation is for all, which means its for you. So take it. John 3 16, God so loved the World he gave his son. Ezekiel 33, God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that all would turn and live. 1 timothy 2:4, God desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

So the Word calls out, even as it does right now and it asks, do you have a heart? Let the word of God break it and out of his abundance find something clean. Do you have a body that can die? Then find in Christ and at his table immortality from the risen King. Do you have ears? Then hear. There is abundance. It is real. It is for you.

Our lectionary committee cut off the romans 9 passage a verse early. It leaves us in despair, mourning those who denied. As we should. But it goes on in verse 6 – Did the word of God fail then? By no means. God’s word goes out and it continues to call, it continues to break hearts of stone according to his will.

And I know the conundrum, if he is in charge of the breaking, and we are in charge of the rejection, then why doesn’t he break all the hearts of stone? Paul answers this, kind of, in Romans 9:19 and 20 – “You will say to me then, “Why does he still

find fault? For who can resist his will?” 20 But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?” Paul sees the dilemma, “God why don’t you just overpower them and make them believe like you have made us believe?”

And this is where we say, “God, come on! Don’t you care? What about the very real child in Saudi Arabia who hasn’t heard your Word. Don’t you care about my loved one who I raised up and has fallen away?” And this is right about the time where I suggest that maybe he cares even more than you!

And you may balk at that. But don’t you remember your Jesus? The one who weeps over Jerusalem. Your Jesus. The one who is rejected in his hometown. Your Jesus. The one who gives his whole life, poured out, knowing that it may be wasted and rejected by some, but such is his love to offer it anyway.

And could it be that his Church, His Word is at work around the world. Throughout all time. To bring child after child after convert after deathbed convert into his loving arms?

And if you still aren’t satisfied with his plan, well then, by all means, as he tells the disciples, “you give them something to eat.” You got a better plan or way of life abundant for the world? You have money and means, get a ticket, fly to arabia and tell the little children. “But pastor that’s dangerous, we could be killed!” Yes, you could. So you don’t want to die trying to save the child in Saudi Arabia? Well then

maybe we shouldn't sit in the comfort of our homes and criticize someone who was willing to die for them, and for you. Your Jesus. Maybe he does care after all, and maybe he cares more than us. You know that loved one, keep reaching out. Nurture that relationship if you can. And it is hard, and we screw up and we feel helpless and it feels hopeless. But I think your Jesus knows that, and I think he cares about them and about you and your broken heart. And he weeps with you. And he, one day, will wipe the tears away somehow.

In the meantime. Let us take heart and be of good courage. Is the Word of God empty of power? Is his work weak? Or has the world been changed, have you sinner, been changed? Is there life, forgiveness, and a risen King? Then march on disciple of the cross. God is at work and we simply cannot compute the unlimited connections his word is making in hearts and minds around the world and what will be called to mind as people draw close to death, or look at the stars, or see that ancient evidence.

We don't know all that. But what we do know. Is that someone, in real time and real space, went to a cross for you and the world. Someone can beat cancer and starvation and death. You know the one who offers abundance and life. You have heard the call, may God the Holy Spirit draw us closer, may God the Holy Spirit help us to grasp every gift of God in faith, cling to them, rejoice in them, and as the Lord has equipped us and as we are able, there's no need to hoard, there is plenty



for all, share it. And may God bless that working as well as we know he has and will continue to do. Amen.