

JOHN 6.1-6
AN EXPOSITION FOR THE TENTH
SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 2003

God's Open Hand

August 17, 2003

Rev. Dr. Jonathan C. Naumann
Redeemer Lutheran Church
Oakmont, Pennsylvania

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The reading that we will look at more closely today is from the Gospel lesson in which we are told that Jesus

- '... took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted.*
- ¹² *And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost."*
- ¹³ *So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten.*
- ¹⁴ *When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"*
- ¹⁵ *Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

In the Small Catechism, Luther instructs the head of the household to teach his family to pray by saying:

*The children and members of the household shall go to the table reverently, fold their hands, and say:
The eyes of all look expectantly*

to You, And You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand And satisfy the desire of every living thing. [Psalm 145:15-16 NKJV]

Then shall be said the Our Father and the following: Lord God, heavenly Father, bless us and these your gifts which we receive from your bountiful goodness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Every material blessing depends on God. Without "**God's Open Hand,**" there would be nothing to eat, nothing to wear, and no shelter from the elements.

After telling us about the miraculous feeding of all those people, St. John describes it in terms of one of his frequent motifs, that of "**signs.**" He says, "*the people saw the sign that he had done.*" A "sign" is an event that points beyond itself to something more important. As an example, the raising of Jairus' daughter, read earlier this summer, pointed to the resurrection of our Lord and to our own resurrection on the last day.

To what does St. John point us as a "sign" that lay beyond this miracle? It is the Sacrament of the Altar. Remember today's Gospel reading began by telling us, "**Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.**"

By classifying this feeding of the five thousand as a "sign," St. John was pointing to a much greater miracle, the Passover fulfilled by Christ, the Son of God. In this Passover He would earn the salvation of the world and would distribute its benefits in another meal, the Holy Supper,

that is the Sacrament of the Altar, repeated by Christians at least every Sunday until He returns in glory.

But there is more here than a sign. There is the daily miracle of how God takes care of our earthly needs. By means of this miracle, our Lord Jesus indicates how God is ultimately the One Who provides for us financially as He *‘... took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted.*

¹² *And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.”*

¹³ *So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten.*

¹⁴ *When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”*

¹⁵ *Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

What imagery does the phrase “God’s Open Hand” bring to your mind? Do you think of God’s open hand as looking for you to put money in that hand? Or does “God’s Open hand” make you think of God’s hand offering to give you what you need, as in the Psalm I read earlier?

Actually, the mind of the Christian should be equally comfortable with both images as we contemplate the phrase “God’s open hand.” For yes, we may say of God *“You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.”* And we may also say of God that His hand is open to receive

from us a return for His financial investment in us.

In view of the fact that He has given us all the money we have and more, of course God has every right to ask you for a return on His investment. But why is it that we often have to say no to God, as His Kingdom looks to us for financial support? Why is it that we balk at the idea of tithing, and couldn’t possibly give a percentage of our income back to God’s Church because the money isn’t there? Is it because God hasn’t opened His hand to us? Is it because God hasn’t given us any money? I don’t think so.

As I look around at all the “stuff” we have, I know that isn’t true. We can’t have “stuff” without having had some money to get all that “stuff.” It is not that God hasn’t given us any money. It is that we have spent it all – and then some. As someone recently said to me, “It is not a sin to have stuff – it is a sin when stuff has you.” Could that be the reason many find themselves less able to support the church than they used to? Could it be that the stuff has us?

The amount of outstanding credit owed by Christians is at an all-time high today. The statistics show that for every dollar they’ve earned, Americans spend one dollar and 17 cents. Despite living in the wealthiest nation the world has ever known, the percentage of income the average American has in savings is below zero. Christians are no exception to this. No wonder appeals for support from the church receive a disappointing response.

When seven out of 10 American Christians live in debt and die in debt, what a trap the devil is laying for those to whom God has given the responsibility for financially supporting His Church. If you, like the average person in this country, owe \$15,000 in school loans, \$17,000 on credit cards, \$20,000 on your car and \$120,000 on your house, no wonder the Church has problems getting her members to support her.

But you may say, “what is the harm in trying to have our cake and eat it now? You only live once. What’s wrong with living on borrowed money? You can’t take it with you anyway.” Yet, that is not the Christian way of looking at life. That is the retailer’s and the moneylender’s line. To the Christian, greed is a serious matter. If you tell people that historically greed was one of the seven deadly sins, people just laugh. Yet, greed is no laughing matter.

Dr. Oswald Hoffman observes that greed has been at the bottom of every war. Greed is responsible for all the bribery that has corrupted people in even the highest places. In greed people kill each other, wreck their economies and destroy their health. Even the Son of God was betrayed by one of his friends for 30 pieces of silver.

One of the greatest tragedies in our present society is the breakdown of the family. Did you know that more grief is caused each year by money problems than any other? Sociologists and family counselors now admit that in 70 percent of all divorces, financial problems were the primary cause. Of those who divorce

within the first seven years of marriage, 90 percent say financial problems were the cause of the failure of that marriage.

What is the harm in abusing credit cards? Did you know that credit card abuse is the cause of 63 percent of all bankruptcies in this country?

No, “you can’t take it with you” – that is true. But you don’t have to be in debt in your old age. Yet, if you live on borrowed money all your life, you will be in debt when you are old, and you may die in debt (as many are doing) – leaving your children, not with an inheritance, but with your debts. There is no dignity in an elderly person having to get a job to pay off credit card debt. Yet, for the first time, a whole generation is looking at retiring in debt. Is that a harmless prospect? You could end up living on Alpo in your old age. Is that what you want? Yet, that is what you will get if you live your whole life in debt.

On the positive side, how much money would we find we had if we did not borrow money so that we could live beyond our means? So why do we do it?

We are falling into the diabolical temptation to live beyond the resources God has given us and turn to another god – a plastic one. Just so we can have what we want now (rather than wait for God), we enslave ourselves to MasterCard and Visa. They become the masters of our money, and there is nothing we can do about it. I remember a clever T-shirt when

I was a boy, in the days when MasterCard was called MasterCharge. The T-shirt had the Christian message “Give the Master Charge of your life.”

To whom are you giving charge of your life when you take your God-given money and commit yourself to paying all of it and more to creditors? It is not God who has charge of your money then. It is the moneylender. The Bible says, the “borrower is the slave of the lender.”¹ This is the form slavery takes in America today. People abusing credit cards and ending up having to give their entire paycheck to MasterCard to pay their debts with interest.

Would the Church have something to gain if her members lived within their God-given means? Yes, it would. Does the Church resent the way that debt robs Christians of what they could be giving to God’s Kingdom? Yes, it does. The Church resents it that greed has led many Christians into the kind of financial bondage that renders them financially useless to the Church. They have given in to the Devil’s temptation to become affluent and are now suffering under the consequences of their sin. And is the Church jealous and resentful of this? Yes it is, and rightly so.

God wants to give us freedom from financial bondage that would be to the mutual benefit of both the Church and us. God intends you to be a steward of what He gives you. He does not want you to be a slave to some debtors. Yes, we know that God is a jealous God. We usually

think of that phrase in connection with the Ten Commandments and its prohibition of worshipping idols. But God is a jealous God in a different way, too. God is jealous of those that have your money and are enslaving you to them. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” God intends to give you money and make you a steward of that money.

But we don’t want to be dependent upon God (Oh no!) We want to be dependent upon the bank!

If you were God, wouldn’t you be jealous if that was the attitude of your children – your Church?

God and His Church are both grieved that Christians, in whom God has invested so much, are making themselves financially independent from Him and financially useless to Him. Furthermore, God is grieved that we are harming ourselves at the same time as we are harming our relationship with Him.

The Bible graphically describes the situation when it says, “people who want

¹ Proverbs 22.7

to get rich fall into temptations and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.”² The Bible continues by saying that “some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

The lives of millions are now controlled by others in their financial affairs and God is robbed of what is due Him as well as Christians are robbed of their own freedom. As the Bible says “the borrower is a slave to the lender.” If you are one of these, let the liberating Word of God speak to you. Let the powerful Word of God give you release from financial bondage.

Out of His love and mercy, our heavenly Father encourages us to look to Him for real meaning and fulfillment in life. He discourages everyone from seeking hope and meaning in life through riches and material goods.

If you today are experiencing the temptation to find meaning and security in life through worldly possessions, take another look at what life is all about. If you find yourself being convinced that more money will answer all problems and bring total fulfillment to life, stop and think things over. Be willing to admit that material possessions are not permanent but only temporary. They will never satisfy the deepest needs of the human soul.

² 1 Timothy 6.9-10.

Listen to the words of Jesus recorded in the gospel of Matthew, chapter six, as he says,

¹⁹ *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,*

²⁰ *but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.*

²¹ *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

²² *“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light,*

²³ *but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*

²⁴ *“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.*

²⁵ *“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. ... For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.*

³³ *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*

Are you worried whether you will have enough to eat or enough clothes to keep you warm? Do you wonder whether anyone will take care of you during your retirement? Are you young and worried about the future? How you will get along in a world that will most likely place

increasing financial demands upon you? Do not let these concerns stampede you into making financial decisions that will eventually enslave you.

Rather, listen to the words of Jesus and contemplate the image of God's open hand. Gaze upon that hand and see the scars that speak of sacrifice. For you know that those nail prints in Christ's hands are evidence that He loves and cares for us poor miserable sinners, and He has done all that is needed to pay for our sins and give us forgiveness and a new and never-ending life.

The great apostle Paul has provided a beautiful answer to all our financial worries when he assures us that "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave Him up for us all – will He not also freely with Him give us all things?" ³

Perhaps you have never thought of it this way. Perhaps in the midst of doubting whether God could supply your daily needs, you have been unable to see what He has already done – that He has already completed and made available to you the greatest of all gifts – the gift of eternal life, through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

God does not want your desires for riches and worldly goods to dictate everything you do in your life. Believe the promises of God and the Truth will set you free. Amen.

³ Romans 8.32