

Non-Transferable Gifts

But the wise answered, saying, "Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves." Matthew 25:9

I received a most wonderful opportunity in the mail last month. Printed on stationary using a script with flourish, the invitation read: "King Philip invites you and a guest to join in his bounteous feast". It was an invitation to attend meal and show at medieval times. Knights on horseback galloping. Lances splintering against shield and metal. Swords and battle axes clanging. I'm sure that the event was at least a \$100 value. But alas, I simply could not attend. I had prior commitments that could only be broken by something serious, like a funeral. Could I at least give the tickets to someone else? The answer was in the not so fine print, "Non-transferable".

Some gifts are simply non-transferable. Such is the gift of faith. We might be able to share the faith in the sense of proclaiming the Word that God uses to extend his invitation to faith or bring a child to baptism whereby God extends his invitation to faith for that child but the faith cannot simply be transferred like so much cash from my account to yours. It is an invitation extended by the King of kings to be received by those whom the Holy Spirit selects.

However, we would very much like to believe that such a gift could somehow be transferred. In a day and age when so many parents are under the belief or expectation that they can and should provide everything to their children they wonder "Why not this also?"

The foolish virgins certainly wanted to believe that it could be. "Give us some of your oil" they cried. The Bridegroom cometh! The wise virgins said no. They sounded so cruel. But cruelty had nothing to do with their decision. It's simply that some gifts are "non-transferable". Still many believe that the gift of faith must be.

Some believe that in baptizing their children, they are, in fact being baptized in the parent's faith, and reaping benefits because of the parents faith. In other words, it's a belief that the gift of faith is transferable from parent to child.

I may be a pastor and mostly I'm up here leading worship, but four weeks a year I get to sit where you are, in the pew, and I tell you, I've overheard some pretty inventive theology spun by well meaning mothers to their children at a baptism. When the pastor said: "Since this child cannot speak for himself and so needs parents or guardians to speak in his stead" was explained as meaning "Since this child does not have faith for himself, he needs his parents to speak of their faith on his behalf". At least that's the explanation I heard 14 pews back from the font in reverent hushed tones.

Not so. When parents and guardians recite parts of the apostles Creed they are speaking simply because the child cannot physically utter the words. But the child is being baptized into the faith which is completely his own. It is the child's faith. Even the youngest of children can

have faith. This is what we say in our Small Catechism. We say it because it is founded upon Scripture. Mt. 18:1 speaks of “these little ones who believe in me” from which we teach that even infants can believe and new birth or regeneration happens in baptism according to John 3:5-7 and Titus 3:5-6)

"Justifying faith", that is; faith that declares us right before God, simply cannot be transferred. Neither can it be earned. It must be given by God alone. It is usually given through “the means of grace”. The means of grace are Word and Sacrament. We may not be able to transfer our faith to our children, loved ones or friends like we might give a blood transfusion. But we can, however, bring them into contact with Word and Sacrament whereby God’s invitation to receive faith is given.

So the wise virgins tell the foolish “Go to the dealers and buy for yourselves”. Now at first there seems something quite un-Lutheran about that advice if you want to equate oil with faith in the parable. “Buy”? How can one buy faith? Well, it isn’t so hard to understand if you have knowledge of the Old Testament, particularly, the prophet Isaiah (chapter 55).

¹ "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.

² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
 Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in rich food.

³Incline your ear, and come to me;
 hear, that your soul may live;
 and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 my steadfast, sure love for David.

...

This is a strange, wonderful gospel buying. It must be this way. First, because these buyers have nothing with which to buy, secondly, because what they are to buy is priceless so that it would be farce to offer anything as a price!

The wise virgins gave the right answer. They gave sound advice. But alas it is too late for the foolish. The bridegroom cometh! The wise virgins, possessing the oil of faith, enter into the marriage feast. What wonder! The foolish virgins had all the appearances of faith. They were no doubt dressed just like the wise. They had lamps like the wise. But though having the appearance of faith they were devoid of it.

Human language must grasp at only partial images of what is to come. Now it is a king’s wedding feast to be certain. Can you speculate? Can you dare imagine? Even on earthly terms

a royal wedding is always wondrous! Of course we are all eagerly anticipating the wedding of the grandson of our queen. Even if it is a royal wedding in the age of austerity it can't help but surpass anything the commoners among us could attend.

I think of the interviews journalists have had over the years with even mere servants at such royal events. Everything doesn't just happen. Stand-ins for the princess are selected. An event co—ordinator is appointed. He stands with stopwatch. He studies camera angles. Hundreds of people work and rehearse and work and rehearse some more until things appear to come together effortlessly and every frame of documentary footage reveals so much detail and pageantry that you could watch it again and again and see something new.

And to think that this wedding feast has been in the works not a mere 6 months or so, but from the foundation of the world at the hands of the One who called all things into creation. Designers make things but only God can be said to truly create something for his creations come out of nothing by the strength of His Word alone.

Truly, we should desire to have our lamps filled with the fuel of faith. Truly our thoughts can focus best when we see the prize. For with one part of the story, the image encourages us and with the other part of the story we are warned. The door is shut. The foolish are left out.

In a world where many youth grow up never experiencing failure it is a hard concept to contemplate the shut door. You are late for school, with some pleading, the class room door is opened. A test is failed. A rewrite is possible. You can't make a court date? There is a procedure to reschedule it. A case is closed? For those with enough drive and determination, there is a procedure to re-open it. But when the King of kings comes, the door is shut and it will not re-open. His final judgment is just. "I never knew you".

The opportunity for faith will pass. The time to buy that faith without price without funds is limited. We can't expect to be bailed out by others who will transfer the needed faith as they might a flow of cash. It is much too weighty for that. May we seize the opportunity to receive our own faith as Jesus grants through Word and Sacrament. May we take all measures to retain it through the long night of waiting which is this life. May we find ourselves among the wise who enter into glory.

Amen.