

Grace to you, and peace, from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, who is that life and life in the world Amen.

As you know, there are many mysteries associated with the Christian faith. How, for example, can we say that God is one, if God consists of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Or, how can we say that Jesus is both divine and human, one person, two natures, and what is the relationship between these two natures, if anything? Or again, how can we say the “eternal” God somehow exists in time, by becoming incarnate in a human being?

Beyond all these however, there is a question that has perplexed and confused people attending Queen Anne Lutheran Church for generations, and that question is this: What exactly is the Pastor’s Discretionary Fund? What is its function? Sure, this keeps you up at night. What is its purpose? Where does the money come from? What difference, if any, does it make in the lives of people living out in the real world?

Well, this morning, boldly, fearlessly and without trepidation, I am going to solve for you the mystery of the Pastor’s Discretionary Fund by not only answering each of these questions, but also by sharing a story about it that illustrates, in two words, the essence of the Christian faith from a Lutheran perspective. That’s a tall order. Do you think we can do it? Yes! Then let’s get right to it.

Simply put, the Pastor’s Discretionary Fund is the fund from which I draw to provide financial assistance to those in need, on your behalf. This money does not come from our general operating budget. Instead, it comes directly from you. Your donations, big or little, large or small, make it possible for me – again, on your behalf – to make a difference in the lives of others, by helping a variety of people in difficult circumstances who come every week to Queen Anne Lutheran Church for help.

Over the years, money from the Pastor’s Discretionary Fund has been used to prevent people from being evicted. It’s put food on the table for families who had, as they tell me repeatedly, nowhere else to turn; and during the holidays, it’s been used by grandparents and parents to purchase toys for their grandchildren and children, toys they otherwise could not afford.

And here’s the thing, every time I offer financial assistance, again, on your behalf, as a congregation, I make it clear that there are *absolutely no conditions*. There are no strings attached. The money they receive is not a loan. It is totally, entirely and completely a

gift. The recipient does not need to pay us back, nor does the recipient need to worship with us.

The only thing I ask is that each recipient remembers that the Lutherans are the nicest Christians around, and that giving unconditionally, giving without strings attached, is fundamental to who we are as Christians. Can I get an Amen?

Now, most recipients, to be sure, are grateful. Yet, of all the people we've helped, and I'm speaking here of those who do not belong to the congregation, there is one person who stands out. I will call her Amy.

Six months ago, Amy moved to the area with her daughter as a single parent. She got a job at a local school, but because of moving expenses, she didn't have enough money to pay for all her bills, particularly the car insurance, which would enable her to get to and from work. Annie called around to various nonprofits, but nobody could help her out. And so on a whim, presumably as a person of faith, she called us, and we — that is, thanks to you — were able to help Amy. We paid for her car insurance. We made it possible at a very difficult time in her life, a time of transition, a time, biblically, we might say, in the wilderness, for Amy to make it through to land on her feet.

Naturally, Amy was grateful. She promised to join us for worship and to update me on her status. A couple months later, and this is to her credit, Amy emailed me to share that she was now on her feet. Our gift made a difference by enabling her to purchase that insurance, as I said, to get to and from work. It didn't solve all of her problems, but it was the Band-aid she needed to keep keeping on.

After that email, however, I never heard or saw from Amy again. Until last week, out of the blue, I got a voicemail message from Amy. She said that because of what our church did, she and her friends started a Bible study. Now she wanted to support us financially, not because she owed us, but purely out of gratitude for the gift she received at a difficult point in her life.

Now, as far as I know, Amy is not a Lutheran — we can't be perfect ☺. She never mentioned Luther's Small Catechism, nor did she ever talk about attending a Lutheran church. But in that moment, in that twinkling of an eye, Anne reminded me of what lies at the core of our faith as Lutheran Christians. Two words: grace and gratitude.

Think about it, life and its renewal are not things we earned. We are not the source of our own existence. These are things we receive — and that's grace.

Faith, then, is simply acknowledging the gift of grace and responding with gratitude. In other words, we do good things for others because of what God has done for us.

Martin Luther captures this perfectly. He writes, “Truly, if faith is there, one cannot hold back. One proves oneself, breaks out into good works, confesses and teaches the Gospel before the people, and stakes his or her life on it. Everything she lives and does is directed to her neighbors’ profit in order to help him, not only to the attainment of his grace, but also in body, property and honor. Seeing that Christ has done this for him, he thus follows Christ’s example.”

Like the younger brother in our Gospel reading for today, we were lost, but have been found, not an account of anything we did, but purely and totally, in the case of the parable, by the Father’s love.

Like the apostle Paul, in our second reading for today, we were separated from God, but are now being reconciled by God to God in Christ.

All of it – our life, our reconciliation with God, our renewal, our ongoing transformation – all of it comes from God. How then could we be anything but grateful? Even the atheist Richard Dawkins says we won the cosmic lottery just by the mere fact that we exist, the odds against which are about a trillion to one. How could we not follow Amy’s example, theistic or not, by giving back because of what’s been given to us?

Dear friends, the Christian faith has many mysteries, much of which was solved at this morning’s forum thanks to Lynn Hofstad. There are others we will solve at our forums as well, but today we have solved one from the pulpit.

The Pastor’s Discretionary Fund exists as one of many ways each of us can give back because of what we have been given. Your gift, big or little, large or small, to the Pastor’s Discretionary Fund – write it in the memo of a check, or indicate it online to Queen Anne Lutheran Church, or to other organizations like Lutheran Disaster Relief, or Lutheran Community Services Northwest – can make a difference.

I have to say, it is so easy right now to feel powerless in this world, but this is one thing you and I can do. That is, through our talents, our treasures and our time, we can make small differences, maybe not to change the world, but at least to make this corner of it a little better. But don’t take my word for it. Just ask Amy.

Amen.