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Saint Bartholomew, Apostle

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Nathanaeling Bartholomews”

Text: Luke 22:24-30; 2 Corinthians 4:7-10; Proverbs 3:1-8

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus had just given His disciples His Supper, His Body and Blood, for the very first time. A momentous occasion, to be sure. Then He said that one of them would betray Him, which was unimaginable. They had all been with Jesus for three years. They were a band of brothers. They had just eaten this new and incredible Passover. Who would turn traitor? They began to debate which of them could possibly do that. And that debate then morphed into what we heard today, that ***a dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.*** Which I guess makes sense? If you're going to argue who's the *worst* among you, then it's not so far to argue about who's the *greatest* among you.

And Bartholomew? The apostle we're commemorating today . . . I think he would be planted firmly in the middle of the pack! I don't think Bartholomew is in any danger of getting the mantle of the greatest. I mean, that's got to belong to Peter, James, or John, right? One of the big three, the inner circle. Or if not them, maybe Andrew or Philip - they seem to be the second tier. But Bartholomew? Nah, he wouldn't get any votes.

But I don't think he'd be considered the worst either. Bartholomew was also known as Nathanael, about whom Jesus had said: *Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit* (John 1:47)! Such praise from Jesus gets you *some* status. But maybe that Matthew fella . . . He was a tax collector in his former life after all. And if you're going to betray your people like that, *maybe* you'll betray your master as well . . .

Now imagine Jesus . . . after He had just given them His Supper . . . sitting there . . . listening to all this . . . who's the worst, who's the greatest . . . had they not learned anything from Him?

So maybe before they get their pecking order all figured out, Jesus cuts them off. Pecking order, status, highest, lowest, greatest, least - this is how the world works. This is how the world thinks and acts. I'm above you. I'm better than you. ***But not so with you***, Jesus says to His now, *hopefully*, a bit embarrassed disciples. **The road to**

greatness is not up, but down. A true leader doesn't demand to be served, but serves. Didn't you see what I just did? You were all just reclining at the table, and who served you? It was me, wasn't it? Your master. Your teacher. The one you, **Peter**, said was *the Christ, the Son of the living God* (Matthew 16:16). The one you, **Nathanael**, said was *the Son of God, the King of Israel* (John 1:49)! And you, **Andrew**, said *we have found the Messiah* (John 1:41). Are you all so great that you deserve to be served by me? Surely you don't think so! Even the greatest among you, the greatest of the twelve, doesn't deserve such an honor. Yet so I honored all of you. So stop this silliness, this *worldliness*. That's not who you are.

And that's not who you are either. Though we do this, too. Compare ourselves with others. And how that usually ends up is that we consider ourselves either far worse or far better than we really are. We either focus on our sins and failures and shortcomings and think we'll never measure up, or we focus on the sins and failures and shortcomings of *others* and think *they'll* never measure up! Then we either despair or become prideful. We look at others with either contempt or with jealousy.

That's how the world works. In the world, there is higher and lower, there is achievement and merit. A law-based system: do this, get that. And that's not bad. Maybe even necessary, in the world. The problem comes when we bring that thinking into the church, like the disciples did. That's when the problems begin. Then faith and salvation and our standing before God becomes something we earn or deserve - law-based - and not by grace, a gift of God. And that kind of thinking can lead us astray.

I heard it again, just this week, in fact. Our president was talking about making peace between Ukraine and Russia, and said that if *anything* was going to get him into heaven, that would be it. Sorry, Mr. President. You're wrong. If anything's going to get you into heaven, it's not anything you will do, great as it may be. It's what Jesus did *for you*. It will be by grace. A gift.

Maybe this is where Bartholomew can help us. Or at least, his names. For the name **Bartholomew** is Aramaic for "son of the furrows," probably a reference to his family being farmers. But we can get *into* furrows, or ruts, in our life. *Sinful* ruts that become comfortable and hard to get out of, even when we know they're not good. But Bartholomew's *other* name, **Nathanael**, is Hebrew for "gift of God." And if we're to get out of our ruts, out of our sin, out of our worldliness, it will be only as a gift of God. As it was for Nathanael. The first time he met Jesus, Philip had told him they found this fella Jesus of Nazareth - the one that Moses and the prophets spoke of. And Nathanael's response was: *Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth* (John 1:46)? One of his ruts, evidently, was a rut of prejudice. And maybe pride. But

instead of condemning him, Jesus lifted him out of his rut, and he became a disciple, and then an apostle.

It's what Jesus does. Because of sin *we are dust (or dirt!), and to dirt we shall return* (Genesis 3:19). We get cast into the dirty, sinful ruts of others. We form dirty, sinful ruts ourselves with well-worn paths of sin. Our ways do not lead us higher, but lower. Our ruts become deeper and deeper, until we die in them and are buried in them, *dust to dust*. What are they for you? Your ruts. The sin you keep returning to. The sin you're comfortable with. Maybe it's pride, maybe despair. Maybe it's rebellion, maybe it's greed. Maybe it's lust, or apathy, or jealousy. Or failing to care about others. What are *your* ruts?

But Jesus has come **to Nathanael us Bartholomews**. To, by His **gift of grace**, lift us out of our **ruts** to a new life.

And Jesus did that by jumping in our ruts with us. Coming down from heaven and jumping into the ruts of the prostitutes and sexual sinners, into the ruts of the tax collectors and the greedy, into the ruts of the prideful and uncaring, into the ruts of the rebellious and hurtful. And into your ruts. Whatever they are, and however deep they are, Jesus is there to die for you in them, and then lift you out in His resurrection. Because the thing to remember is that when we're talking about the greatest and the least, the highest and the lowest, the best and the worst, is that Jesus was the greatest, highest, and the best who became the last, the lowest, and the worst - He became *that guy*, even the worst betrayer! - in order to raise you, buried under all your sins and the sins of others, to a new life. A life no longer in the ruts, the way of sin, but in His way, the way of life.

Jesus did that for you when He baptized you in those waters of new life, new birth, forgiveness, resurrection. Waters Nathanael's own hands used to give what his name means: *the gift of God*. How many of the 3,000 who were baptized on the Day of Pentecost were baptized by him? And how many after that? How many before, as history records, he was martyred by flaying - having his skin cut off his body. But Nathanael knew, or came to know, that **the gift of God is greater than the strength of men**. They could kill Bartholomew, throw him into what this name of his kind of means - a furrow, or grave of dirt. But they couldn't take his life. The new and heavenly life that baptism gives.

That confidence is what St. Paul wrote about in the Epistle we heard today. ***But we have this treasure*** - the good news of Jesus - ***in jars of clay***, - or dirt! - ***to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us***. And notice how he now contrasts the *weakness* of the flesh with the *strength* of the Spirit . . . ***We are afflicted in every way*** (in the body), ***but not crushed*** (in the Spirit); ***perplexed, but not***

driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

Death, ***so that***, in order that, life. Jesus' death, for your life.

And that's not only *the gift of God* that **inspired** Nathanael's name, that he **gave** in baptismal waters, and that he **lived**, but he also **preached**. To people concerned about greatness, about ranking. Been there, done that, he could say. There's something better than that, greater for you, *in Jesus*, the gift of God who *gives* the gift of God.

Now the world scoffs at that. Scoffing that whoever Jesus is and whatever He wants to give me doesn't make my life better, but worse. So **no thank you**. And, you know, maybe that's true. *Maybe* following God's Word in this world makes things harder for you. Others lie, cheat, and steal to get ahead, but not so with you. Others use, and misuse, and abuse others for their own gain, but not so with you. Things that are legal in the world are still sometimes things a Christian won't do. So is my life as a Christian better? When there is, as we heard from Paul, affliction, persecution, hardship, disadvantage, and maybe even a bloody death?

Well, yes! Because as a Christian your life isn't just how high you can climb now, or how much you can get now, or how easy you have it now - as a Christian, your life *is eternal*. Your life won't end as a **Bartholomew**, in the furrow of the grave, but go on as a **Nathanael**, as a gift of God, risen from the dead, in His kingdom that has no end. You may not get a **throne** and **judge the twelve tribes of Israel**, as Jesus promised the apostles. But you will ***eat and drink with Jesus at His table in His kingdom***. In fact, you already now have a place at His table here, and feast on His Body and Blood - new food, living food, that gives the gift of God, a new life, and makes you *Nathanaels*.

And whether you are the highest or the lowest, the greatest or the least, a really bad sinner or a *really* bad sinner, you get to live a new life, right where you are, as a Nathanael, a gift of God, to those around you. And don't underestimate the impact you have. You may not see it or realize it, but leave that to Jesus. Or as He had King Solomon write in Proverbs: ***Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*** He'll see to it. For your benefit and theirs. Even if that means the victory of a martyr's death.

So as we commemorate St. Bartholomew today, we really commemorate what Jesus did *for* him and *through* him. And for us the same. For us who are maybe not the

greatest, maybe not the least, maybe planted firmly in the middle. But important to Jesus and precious to Him. His baptized child with a seat at His table and the promise of life eternal with Him. Which, all in all, is a pretty good gift of God. Bartholomew once asked, *Can anything good come from Nazareth?* And maybe for us, the question is: Can anything good come out of me? Or him? Or her? Or this situation I'm in? Or this disease? Or this trouble? *Come and see*, Bartholomew was told. *Wait and see*, might be the advice for us. And you just might be surprised at what Jesus *can* and *will* do. And all the **Bartholomews** he will turn into **Nathanaels**, gifts of God. *Like you*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.