

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

The first president of the Missouri Synod, Dr. C. F. W. Walther, had great insight into how we love and why. Consider what he had to say...

Man is created in such a way that he must love something. A person cannot go through the world indifferent. Inside of him, he carries the inextinguishable desire, not only to know all sorts of things, but also to enjoy himself in something. **The human heart cannot be empty of all love.** If a person does not love God, he loves the world. If he does not love the Creator, he loves the creation. If he does not love the invisible, he loves the visible. If he does not love the heavenly, he loves the earthly. If he does not love the holy and pure, he loves the unholy and impure.

When man first came forth from the hand of God, the right, true, and holy love lived in his heart. He loved God above everything else, as the source of all goodness, joy, and blessedness. And he loved his fellow man, created like him, as a companion of his nature, as his second self. And in this holy love, man was happiest and most highly blessed. But when man fell into sin, a great, lamentable change took place. The love of God as the highest good and the love of his neighbor as himself ceased. Man retained his created heart with its longing, but he now filled his heart with another love: the love of the creature, of the perishable things of the world, even of sin itself.

As a person's bodily hunger always seeks to be satisfied, so too does love, the hunger of the soul. The prodigal son, who defiantly renounced the house of his wealthy father and the communion of his brother and ended up hungry in a foreign land, greedily devoured the food of the most disgusting animals. In the same way, a man who no longer loves God more than anything else, and who no longer loves his neighbor as himself, greedily devours even the food of the unclean spirits, sin. A heart that is empty of the love of God and of neighbor does not become completely empty. Just as a vessel that was once filled with the most expensive wine is now filled with only air when its sweet contents are gone, so too the heart of man, when it becomes empty of holy love, fills itself with the love of vanity and of emptiness.

All people born into the world are filled with this unholy love. Each person, by nature, has a heart that **must love, a desire for happiness, and a longing for peace and quiet that he must satisfy.** However, as long as God does not alter the heart of a person, that person does not seek his happiness in the love of God and his neighbor. Instead, one seeks it in riches, another in lust, and a third in glory.

Nevertheless, there is a small group of people in the world, known only by God, who have a heart that has been changed by God. The Epistle to the Hebrews describes them in this way: *"These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth"*(11:13). Saint Paul sketches the following picture of them: *"Those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who*

rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:29–31). Who, then, are they? They are the born-again children of God, the true Christians. They are in the world but not of the world. Their bodies are on earth, but their hearts are in heaven.

As long as Christians still live in this world, they are in great danger of losing the heavenly, holy sense of love God has planted in them. Therefore, they must always examine themselves to see if they still stand in such love, and they must always rouse themselves to it anew.

Recent research of 18 to 29 year-olds sheds interesting insight into this very unchurched generation. While they have rejected organized religion like no other generation before them, when asked, they seek happiness and peace above everything else. They look for happiness (and the peace that will provide it) in a variety of ways, but as Dr. Walther states, if they don't know God, they will seek happiness "in riches...in lust, [or]...in glory." They're traveling down a dead-end road that only leads to despair. To know that Jesus came down from heaven, that He was willing to give up everything to die for you, so that you could be freed from the bondage of sin – to know this is to truly know love. This love changes the heart and mind. Freed from the guilt and shame of our past mistakes, we can love the way God intended for us: first Him, above all else, and then our neighbor. May we be that loving Christ to someone who does not know God's love. May we help our lost friend, family member, or acquaintance to find what they're seeking: Jesus' love for them.

Pastor Travis