

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

One of the most common complaints that non-Christians direct at the Church is that, **"It's all about the money."** Satan loves to push the notion that the Christian church is really just a manmade enterprise that seeks to extract money from the poor and the naïve, for its own selfish purposes. And that plays into our selfish notions about giving to others. However, Jesus' own words in Luke 6 give us the truth about giving to others: ³⁰*Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back.* ³¹*And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them...* ³⁵*love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.* ³⁶*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."* (ESV)

God loves all people equally. We, as Christians, are charged with a **special calling: to share God's love with all, even those that we think are undeserving of our love.** The Church is **God's House**, created and sustained by Him to reach-out in love to the community and the world – even to the enemies of God. And we must not think that giving sacrificially to the church and to our neighbor is only for the "rich" (that's a convenient "escape clause" that we frequently use to let us "off the hook"). **All of us have been given an abundance and are "rich" in God's eyes.** John the Baptist reminds us, *"Whoever has two tunics [or coats] is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise"* (Luke 3:11). Do you have two coats in your closet? Do you food in your cupboards? You are "rich" by God's standard.

Our human nature, however, demands that **we be selective with our love** and our gift giving. Before loving someone, they need to prove to us that they're worthy of our love, and will not squander it. We count and measure every dime we have, imagining that one day we may need it, if God decides to withhold His gracious giving to us. That's Satan's trick as well: "Did God really say... are you sure you can trust God?"

Jesus tells us to love and give to the undeserving, even to our enemies. I know that this is hard. If you find it difficult to give to someone or something that *passes* your "worthiness test", how much harder is it to give to someone who you judge to be *totally unworthy*? This person has mistreated you in the past. He or she has never said to you, "I'm sorry." That leads us to this important truth: **We can love and give to all because we have been loved and given good things in Christ Jesus.**

Today, you're in a position to give love (yes, even to love sacrificially), **for you were first loved by your Father in heaven, who has shown steadfast mercy to you.** We're reminded in James chapter 1 that *God* is the giver of all good gifts (v. 17). Do you think you have received all those good things because you were worthy to receive them? Think again. You are unworthy, yet, while you were still a sinner, Christ died for you. You were a blistering enemy of God, never once telling Him, "I'm sorry," and yet, He has brought you into His kingdom. **How did this happen?** First, someone had to pay down your debt of sin. **Your spiritual bank statement** was covered in **red ink** – your debt to God, unimaginably high. If God used *your* "worthiness test" on *you*, before He gave you good gifts, what would your life be like today?

Instead, Jesus, the Father's only Son, goes to the cross with your red ink all over Himself. His

miserable suffering and death is given to you as the best gift you will ever receive, since **your red ink of sin was covered by His shed blood**. You were fully reconciled to your Father - by Jesus' atoning work for you.

The truth is nothing is won or lost by having more stuff. We have everything necessary when we abide in Christ Jesus, and He in us (see John 15). What remains in this life is **not** a burden or something that must be done by you to qualify for heaven. Instead, what's left is a **golden opportunity to love the Lord your God**, with all your **heart**, and with all your **soul**, and with all your **mind** (Matt. 22:37). How do you love the Lord, for all His goodness and kindness that He has showered upon you? Jesus tells us how, in Matthew 25. He said, *"Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'"* (v. 37-40). If your grand plan for loving the Lord is to come to worship and to say, "Lord, I love you," and then leave His house and turn your back on your neighbor in need – you of all people are most to be pitied.

The true measure of the worth of a Christian is not found in their bank account or their possessions. What you have or do not have does not change who you are or what you are worth. It doesn't matter if you live or die with nothing more to your name than the change in your pocket, or if you have a million dollars. Your salvation is accomplished, you have eternal life as your guarantee (1 Corinthians 15:42). Your complete worth is clearly shown in your Creator God's willingness to die for you. So everything else that God gives you – is merely "icing on the cake."

We learn from today's text that **God wants our motivation for giving to others - to be love for Him and love for our neighbor.** As we have received mercy, we are to extend mercy to others. We are to give out of a sense of **freedom we have in Christ** – a freedom that opens the doorway to real, substantial love. We love, because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). And so, we recognize our money and possessions as nothing more than **a tool** that we have at our disposal to use for the benefit of our neighbor. **And what is the greatest good that your neighbor receives when He receives your love? He sees Christ Jesus in you!** God is glorified when others receive your undeserved love, even as you are loved undeservedly by God. So share from your abundance, for you are most certainly loved and have been given good things by God.

Pastor Travis