SAINT MARK'S NEWSLETTER, for the 4th quarter of 2006

October 29, 2006

Grateful Recipients and Grateful Givers – And All At The Same Time?

How can this be? How could we be grateful recipients and grateful givers at the same time? In most situations of life we learn to know and realize that there is give and take. When we receive a paycheck, we know that we gave of our time and energy for the company/business. Even in the reception of a gift, the idea of giving clashes with our receiving that particular gift. When we receive a gift we will not hand it (or even a portion of it) back to the giver. To do so would offend and insult the generosity of that person.

Only in our relationship with God is such a concept able to be reconciled and understood. First, by God's grace we are given full salvation from sin, death and hell. "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Romans 3:28). Indeed, there was no give or take. We have no buying power to lay claim to such a gift. In fact, the law of God shows us and proves to us that we drastically fall short meeting God's high demands. Secondly, when we consider God's generous gifts to us we will invariably lose count. There is too much to keep track of. "The earth is the LORD'S, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). We are God's people by faith in his Son, the God/Man Jesus Christ. And as his people we are infinitely blessed with a new life in Christ and eternal life with him in heaven. On top of this primary gift he showers us with the added extras. It is in varying degrees, but they are undoubtedly there. Money and stuff is with us. But God is not offended or insulted when we give such gifts back to him. But rather, he is insulted when we hold onto these added extras . . .

- **With the notion that God owed them to us.**
- **With the idea that they are MINE to do with as I please.**
- **With an attachment to them that supersedes our attachment to Christ.**

So how will God have us gratefully give back to him, while at the same time be his grateful recipients?

Luther's Small Catechism addresses this truth and concept in the study of the Seventh Commandment. YOU SHALL NOT STEAL. What does this mean? We should fear and love God that we do not take our neighbor's money or property, or get it by dishonest dealing, but help him to improve and protect his property and means of income.

In short, we do not give back to God my putting our offerings in a rocket ship and shooting it off to heaven. We give to God by helping our neighbor "to improve and protect his property and means of income". In expounding upon this teaching, we learn that by giving for the good of my neighbor, I am giving back to God. Bear in mind that giving to my neighbor falls into four primary categories: Family (with support), The Poor (with help), The Government (with taxes), and My Church (with offerings). Are we giving serious thought to this expression of our faith in God? In truth, only each one of us can answer that question. Perhaps we need to give more attention to one area that has been neglected. God clearly wants us to give to his church without neglecting our other responsibilities. Yet he also wants our support for the Gospel ministry to be our priority. When Saint Paul was coming to the church in Corinth to gather an offering for the church in Jerusalem he wrote, "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made" (1 Corinthians 16:2).

Making these decisions in faith are a challenge and an exercise. Such decisions involve (1) trust in God's continual providence, and (2) the faithful management of all those added extras. Yet let us be guided by God's love for us and all people. Let us know with certainty that when we give for the good of our neighbor we are giving to God. Martin Luther regularly reminded his readers to see Jesus in their neighbor, and then to willingly serve him/her with that mindset in place. Jesus holds this principal forth in Matthew chapter 25, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40). God bless and sanctify your choices in gratefully giving back to God with these added extras.

Pastor Lon P. Kuether

ST. MARK'S MISSION STATEMENT Because Jesus directs us, "Go and make disciples of all nations . . ." (Matthew 28:19), our mission at St. Mark's is to nurture believers with the Word and Sacraments, preparing them for a life of service to the Triune God; and to spread the good news of Jesus and his forgiveness to our community and beyond.

NEWS FROM YOUR CHURCH!

- **ADDRESSES AND CONTACTS NEEDED! Dear parents, if your child is attending a college or university, or stationed in the military, please share that information with Pastor Kuether. He is able to pass that news onto our nearest WELS pastoral contact or to be on a WELS List for receiving a mailing of devotional materials.**

CAMPUS MINISTRY is getting set meet on the BSU campus again. We have two WELS college students who are submitting the campus ministry paper work at BSU, to qualify our campus ministry (TRUE NORTH) as an on-campus ministry. It looks like Tuesday evenings will our scheduled meetings (twice a month). Keep this much needed nurture and outreach in your prayers.

MEMBER SOLDIERS IN OUR PRAYERS. Alex Peterson is in transition to returning to the states within the next month or so. While Sam Schroeder still has a few months of duty remaining in Iraq. Sam's mailing address will be included in an upcoming bulletin so that you may send him a holiday greetings card.

Adult Bible Class Topics
Our adult Bible Class (on Sunday Mornings) has begun a study on the topic of Friendship Evangelism**.**

SUNDAY SCHOOL ANNOUNCEMENT
To the parents of Sunday School students: A note was put in your church boxes concerning the Christmas service. Feedback is needed from you concerning the participation of your children in the service. Please read the note, fill out the slip at the bottom and return the slip to a Sunday School teacher as soon as possible. If a note was not put in your box please talk to Mr. Bitter. The information is needed to help plan out the Christmas Service.

COME AND CELEBRATE THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION, NEXT SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 5th!
After our morning worship (10:15 a.m., service time) we will share in a potluck meal. Members of St. Mark's are being asked to bring a main dish and a salad or dessert to pass. Please try to have your main dish be some kind of German food.

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DID YOU KNOW THAT SUNDAY AND MONDAY WILL NOT BE OUR ONLY OPPORTUNITIES TO WORSHIP OUR SAVIOR GOD?

- **SPECIAL WORSHIP SERVICES IN NOVEMBER and DECEMBER**
  - **Thanksgiving Day, November 23, at 9:00 a.m.**
  - **Advent Wed. #1, December 6, at 7:00 p.m.**
  - **Advent Wed. #2, December 13, at 7:00 p.m.**
  - **Advent Wed. #3, December 20, at 7:00 p.m.**
  - **SUNDAY SCHOOL CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE, December 24, 7:00 p.m.**
  - **Christmas Day, Monday, December 25, at 9:00 a.m.**
    - **THERE WILL BE NO MONDAY EVENING WORSHIP ON DEC. 25**
  - **New Year's Eve, Sunday, December 31, at 7:00 p.m. (w. Holy Communion)**
    - **THERE WILL BE NO MONDAY EVENING WORSHIP ON JAN. 1**

JESUS CARES MINISTRY – HERE AT SAINT MARK'S

You already know that the developmentally disabled people of our community need Jesus just as much as you and me. And the gospel makes it increasingly clear that we have no greater hold on salvation than these disabled citizens among us. Indeed, not one person is more deserving of God's mercy than any other person. With that in mind, God has again humbled us in our small efforts to reach these people with the message of salvation. He has truly showered numerous blessings down upon our ministry to meet their spiritual needs with the Word of God. Recently, on October 21, a Jesus Cares Rep. was in attendance. She offered high compliments for our ministry. And she suggested that area ELS and WELS congregation should observe how we do things. On that day we had 19 students and 9 accompanying staff workers in attendance.

Here are some quick facts.

- We continue to meet on the first and third Saturdays of each month through May.
- We are averaging over ten students per class.
- After meeting once in September and twice in October, the attendance has steadily increased at each meeting.
- Students and accompanying staff have requested and received bibles for personal use.
- Singing hymns and spiritual songs along with the use of rhythm instruments is a favorite way for the students to express their joy of the gospel
- Finally, we are especially grateful to the volunteers of St. Mark's who have sacrificed their Saturday mornings to help spread the saving Word of God.

MORE NEWS TO PASS ALONG!

THE INSPIRATIONAL GIFT COMPANY has a variety of Christian-based items to sell. Their intent is that these items would be sold as a kind of fund-raiser. But that is NOT what we are doing! Therefore, you may choose to purchase these items at actual cost. The items on display in fellowship hall are those things they have already shipped for sale. These will only cost you $10.00 apiece. An assortment of other items may also be ordered. A sheet for placing these orders is on the table in the fellowship hall. These will have to cost $12.00 apiece, in order to cover the additional shipping cost. Make any checks out to Saint Mark's Lutheran Church.

OUTREACH TO INCARCERATED PRISONERS: Our school children of Saint Mark's School have made Christmas cards that will be sent to our WELS Prison Ministry. These cards were made with encouraging messages and a focus upon the true meaning of Christmas.

Few people within our fellowship would argue with these statements. The real issue is whether Biblical standards of righteousness and morality can be maintained among God's people, the Church. Can God's people be expected to continue to be a glowing light in an ever darkening world? A true salt on earth's unsavory landscape?

What is marriage anyway? From the Bible we learn that marriage is a life-long, exclusive union between one man and one woman, as husband and wife. From the beginning of time it was God's plan, revealed in Genesis 2, that "*a man will **leave** his father and mother and **be united** to his wife, and they will **become one flesh."*** The "leaving" spoken of here is a leaving to establish a second generation household. The "uniting" is in the life-long bond of marriage. It is only in this established new home in the bond of marriage that they are to "become one flesh." This includes the exclusive sexual union that further binds them together and potentially opens the door to a third generation of legitimate offspring.

Such principles could be scoffed at as relics of a past time. But what does the Word of God say? "*It is God's will that you should be sanctified; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God….The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (I Thessalonians 4:3-7).*

It should not surprise us that "heathen, who do not know God," might give themselves to "passionate lust." What is grievous is that anyone claiming the title "Christian" should boldly "live in sin." God calls sexual intimacy between unmarried persons (fornication) sin. Specific Bible passages soundly condemn fornication as immoral (I Corinthians 6:9, Ephesians 5:3, Hebrews 13:4).

Okay, but the couple claims that they "are not doing it." They are still "cohabitating" – living together as husband and wife without honoring the state, God, themselves, or each other. Furthermore, as Christians, we are called to live above reproach – "*Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality….because these are improper for God's holy people"* (Ephesians 5:3).

Is the Church being judgmental in condemning members who are cohabitating? Yes, but not wrongly, because God calls upon Christians to lovingly and firmly admonish each other when they sin. The Holy Spirit's warning is severe: "*If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left* (not even Christ's sacrifice on the cross) *but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God." (Hebr. 10:26-27*).

If a cohabitating person refuses to repent, or claims to repent but continues in the sin, God says there is no forgiveness (Luke3:8). Sin separates from God. (Isaiah 59:2). While making wedding plans may include an admission of wrong, this in and of itself is not true repentance, if the living arrangement remains unchanged.

Under these circumstances, a pastor and congregation will rightly urge a couple to reconcile with God first. Then they may proceed with plans for a wedding and marriage blessed by God. To be sure, we do not want to drive individuals or couples away from the church. The gravity of the situation, however, calls for Christian admonition to bring them back into the invisible Church, the Family of God. Their unrepentant sin has separated them from God and His Church (see paragraph above).

Years ago, a pastor and his congregation implemented loving church discipline for a young lady who was living with her boy friend. Communication with the individual was lovingly carried out by phone, correspondence, and the pastor driving a considerable distance for a visit. The stress of a guilty conscience contributed to this person losing much of her beautiful hair. Finally the congregation excommunicated her. The public announcement of this voters' decision received mixed and strong reaction within the congregation. Members who understood the Biblical principles helped disturbed fellow members grasp the importance of the congregation's actions carried out according to Jesus' directives in Matthew 18:15-18.

Before much time passed, the young lady "returned home" – to her parents and to her church family. She received full and free forgiveness from her church and from her God (1 John 1:7-9, John 20:23). A year or two later the pastor accepted a call to another congregation. At the church door after his farewell service, the pastor received his most appreciative tearful hug from this young lady whom he had counseled and regarding whom he had called for excommunication. It doesn't always work out that way, but if we proceed according to God's loving will for His wandering sheep, the bitter sting of the Law and the sweet comfort of the Gospel can accomplish great things.

May God bless our congregations as together we strive to correct, rebuke, and encourage God's people – motivated and empowered by the Gospel - to live holy and righteous lives!

– with God's grace and guidance for our giving

A-Z checklist

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Giving that recognizes our IDENTITY

Our Identity is all about relationship
Primarily God's relationship with us in Jesus!

- Let life reflect the greatness of God's grace that treasures you!
  a. ____ Am I growing in my relationship with Jesus in my personal life?
  b. ____ Am I listening to his Word regularly in order to know him better?
- Live in trust that the Lord will take care of you
  c. ____ Do I step out in faith knowing God takes care of me?
  d. ____ Do I ask God to help me where my faith is weak?

Giving that grows out of our PRIORITY

Our Priority is all about relationship
Treasuring our relationship with Jesus!

- Respond with cheerful freedom (freewill)!
  e. ____ Am I living my whole life as a "living sacrifice" to God?
  f. ____ Am I seeing my giving as a joyful privilege rather than duty?
- Practice first fruits giving!
  g. ____ Do I honor God with the best of what I have rather than leftovers?
  h. ____ Do I set aside offering money from my income before I start paying bills or purchasing things?
  i. ____ Do I see my "off the top" giving as an indication of how I intend to honor God with the rest?
- Practice proportionately generous (%) giving!
  j. ____ Do I weigh how much God has given me to determine my gift?
  k. ____ Do I figure a percentage of my income as a gauge of what to give?
  l. ____ Does this percentage honor God and represent a thankful heart?

Giving that impacts our Mission:

Our Mission is all about relationships
–relationships with souls God treasures

- Live not as owners but as stewards (managers) of God's stuff!
  - m. ____ Do I see that my whole life—including my time, talents and talk—is to be used for his purposes?
  - n. ____ Do I ask how God would want me to use my finances?
  - o. ____ Do I decide my purchases based on what will honor him?
  - p. ____ Do I look at wise ways to "invest" the money he has given me for his kingdom work?
- Follow planned, regular giving!
  - q. ____ Do I plan ahead what I will be giving every week?
  - r. ____ Do I still set aside the same amount even when I am away?
- Expect the Lord will use your giving as a blessing!
  - s. ____ Do I trust God with the gifts I give even when the use of them isn't clear or to my liking?
  - t. ____ Do I know how my gifts have impacted others?
  - u. ____ Do I look for additional needs and opportunities to give?
  - v. ____ Have I experienced the satisfaction the grace of giving has made in the lives of others?

Giving that is reflected in our Commitment:

Our Commitment is all about relationships
–our faithful relationship with the treasures God gives us

- Test the Lord's Promises with bold faith!
  - w. ____ Does my giving represent a high level of faith?
  - x. ____ Do I test out God's promises of generosity in my level of giving?
  - y. ____ Does my faith supersede the challenges of my circumstance?
  - z. ____ Does my spiritual life exhibit a desire to mature in my faith by constant use of God's Word so I am better trained to respond in even greater ways (He 5:11-6:1)?

HEBREWS 5:11-6:1, "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God."