**Sts. Peter & Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church LC-MS**

Monthly Newsletter --- December 2020

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“THE ROCK and THE SWORD”

“Built upon the Rock of Christ and wielding the

Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God.”

**IT’S TIME TO START SACRIFICING**

*\*Much time, prayer, and effort has gone into this piece of writing. It is much longer than my typical writings because it would, on the surface, seem to be only self-serving. But what is written has its foundation in the whole counsel of God. Please take the time to read it in full. Sections have been marked with dividers for natural breaks. (Estimated reading times per section are noted.) ~In Christ, Pastor Deal*

**WHAT’S HAPPENING THIS YEAR?  (Estimated reading time:  5 minutes)**

A great number of congregations this year will be working with a decreased income; some have come to the point of realizing they can no longer support the church budget. Others will have just enough, but budget committees will sit down and start talking about what has to get the “axe”. Yes, it is that time of the year to start sacrificing things. It’s thought provoking to ask yourself this question, “What am I prepared to sacrifice?” When things get tight at home, you are called to say “no” to some things which are non-essential. But what is non-essential in the life of the Church? Now, in many places there are those with strong opinions that sit on budget committees and assuredly will be present at voters’ assemblies. They’re not shy to offer up their opinions saying, “Do we really need \_\_\_\_\_\_?” Sometimes they bring up some very valid points. Yet there are others who go so far as to begin with sacrificing the pastor’s salary, healthcare, housing, conference budget, books, and continuing education. But why is it that some believe taking more away from the pastors will help the long-term health of the congregation? Why do we not hear the plea of congregation leaders saying, “Since our congregation’s only true need is Word and Sacrament Ministry, let’s evaluate our own lives and what we might sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel to be preached?” Let’s examine what God promises He will bless and what can be sacrificed without injury, all according to the Scriptures.

First, we must establish the firm ground on which congregations are made to exist. Christians assemble together because God calls them to gather around His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. He blesses those who gather around His word by serving them. In preaching, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, God is handing out for us all what was won by His Son on the cross and proclaimed at the resurrection. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his disciples to make disciples of all nations, and to baptize, and to teach them all that He had commanded, (Matthew 28:19-20). He also said, “Thus it is written that Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-49). It is quite clear from the epistles written by Peter, Paul, John, and Luke that these things are the substance of Christ’s Church on earth, because it is Christ’s blood which is forgiving. If you do not find the preaching of repentance and forgiveness in Christ’s name at a congregation, then it also stands to reason you will not find God presence there for you. He is present when you hear about His blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins; He is present when you are washed with the crimson flood of Christ’s blood in baptism; He is present when you also drink of Christ’s forgiving blood in the Lord’s Supper. These things are the non-negotiables of a Christian congregation on earth. These are the visible marks of the true Church. The Apostles, beginning in Jerusalem, went around to every place, set up congregations, and raised up elders, which are the equivalent to what we call pastors, who would faithfully feed the sheep of Christ through the Word and the Sacraments.

Those are the essentials of God’s ministry and His care for His creation. God’s mission is that all people come to truth and are brought to repentance.  God has already set the purpose for His Church on Earth. Congregation members need not lose sleep over what they should be focusing their efforts on or where God is leading them. There is no option for us. We must wholly and completely be devoted to the Word and the Sacraments being given to us. That is God’s ministry and His work through the office of Preaching and Teaching by which He gives us Christ and opens heaven's gates to us. Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). When we treasure God’s gifts above all else, we learn that, in essence, we can sacrifice everything we do and have, so long as these gifts remain with us when we assemble together. This means we can sacrifice buildings, schools, comfort dogs, LERT Teams, food pantries, clothing banks, youth groups, outings, technologies, and much, much more if only we keep the things which are necessary for our faith:  The Word and Sacraments. This is not to say that congregations, which are financially able, should not care for the sick, the poor, the destitute or have any other number of things, like wonderful buildings and Christian schools. But these things do not come first, nor should they continue to remain, while the Office of Preaching and Teaching is stifled or threatened.

**GOD’S WORDS  (Estimated reading time:  4 minutes)**

Hear a few words for us to consider about what God has spoken concerning those who preach and teach in the congregations. First, Saint Paul’s words to young Timothy, the pastor of the Church of Ephesus:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.” 1 Timothy 5:17-18

Second, Saint Paul’s presumably self-serving words to the assemblies in Corinth and for all the saints:

This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? 1 Corinthians 9: 3-12

Lest we think that a congregation’s priorities are skewed because a majority of the funds go to pay the pastor, let us consider also the words of Jesus upon sending out the 72. Jesus said to those men who would travel to the cities and villages delivering the good news and healing the sick:

Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house!’ And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. But if not, it will return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages. Do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. Luke 10:3-8

A congregation’s budget often looks heavily-weighted on supporting the pastor and his family. It should be that way. If a congregation believes that it is not necessary and commanded by God to pay its pastor fairly, then it needs to examine again what is written in the Bible. We also should not only concern ourselves with the present, but also have a plan into the future for how our children and grandchildren will inherit the Ministry of Preaching and Teaching. There is no doubt in my mind that many pastors will, in the coming years, be called to make great sacrifices in their lives. Whatever is brought to affect him will also bring a consequential effect on his family. Pray that each man will gladly and most humbly sacrifice all things trusting in the Lord to provide for them. But let’s be clear, this idea that because the pastor is a servant of Christ and the Gospel, he alone must bear the burden of sacrifices in terms of his salary, life, family, finances, and health is pure evil if the members of Christ’s Church are not willing to make those same sacrifices for the sake of hearing and receiving from the Lord’s messengers.

**THE TREASURES OF THE MINISTRY  (Estimated reading time:  5 minutes)**

    Recently, I have become familiar with The Minister’s Prayer Book, first published in 1959 by John Doberstein. In it I came across a quotation from James Stalker, who was a Scottish Presbyterian minister from the end of the 19th century to the early 20th century. He wrote this about ministers,

I like to think of the minister as only one of the congregation set apart by the rest for a particular purpose. They say to him: Look, brother, we are busy with our daily toils, and confused with cares, but we eagerly long for peace and light to illuminate our life, and we have heard there is a land where these are to be found, a land of repose and joy, full of thoughts that breathe and words that burn, but we cannot go thither ourselves. We are too embroiled in daily cares. Come, we will elect you, and set you free from toil, and you shall go thither for us and week by week trade with that land and bring us its treasures and its spoils.

Week in and week out, the pastor concerns himself with bringing to you a treasure that comes from heaven. He brings to you what you cannot find through all your labors on earth, but what must be given to you from the hand of God. When the pastor is doing the things which God calls him to do faithfully, the Church of God responds in joy by caring for his physical needs, so that he can accomplish and more fully devote his time to giving you more of Christ. When one is caring for your soul as Christ commanded, it is not burdensome to offer your care for them. We see how greatly moved to compassion the women were who cared for and served Christ and the disciples. When Jesus was traveling around with His disciples, it is written in Luke 8 these names, “Mary, called Magdalene,...and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.” Even the Creator of the Universe did not refuse the care His Church offered Him while He served them with the Word on His way to the cross.

Pastors receive their ministry by the mercy of God and uphold it by the same. So, it is true that a pastor must also heed the words of Saint Paul from 1 Thessalonians. He must guard himself against vainglory, the praise of man, and filthy greed. His reward is the blood of Christ and his treasure, eternal life. Each and every member of the congregation whom he has been entrusted with, should be precious and dear to him. After all, God has called him to care for the children which were bought and paid for by Christ’s blood. He must be mindful that his calling is no holier than those Christians in other vocations, so as to guard himself against arrogance and pride, thus provoking the wrath of God. He is a steward and guardian of the mysteries of God, and he must, above all, be ready to share all things with those for whom he cares.

For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. 1 Thessalonians 2:6-8

The pastor, himself, should most-willingly sacrifice following the example of Christ, who is the Head of the Church. The pastor is called to lead by example, readying himself to suffer all things, even to lay down his life and that of his family, that he might above all be a witness of the Gospel, preach, teach, baptize, visit the jailed, the sick, the infirmed, the shut-in and the hospitalized with the Gospel of Christ. We learn that the prayer of a righteous man availeth much as God writes in James 5. As you are toiling about in the daily grind of life, God blesses you with pastors to pray over you, intercede for you, and continually place you before His throne, even when you aren’t aware of it. God also is with them as they rein in sinful nature through rebuke and admonishment, as well as when they strengthen the new man through forgiveness and exhortation at all times and places. They may receive no favor or praise from the world; they might even be hated by unbelievers or even by some within their own congregation, but they abide and rest in the mercy of God. For all this that pastors not only give, but also endure and suffer, should not the Church of God find it more blessed to give joyfully of all that it has to support him?

**A SACRIFICE COMMANDED AND COMMENDED BY GOD**

**(Estimated reading time:  6 minutes)**

When I started off as a young pastor, called into the ministry at the age of 25, I began to wonder if I should feel guilty for receiving/asking for fair compensation. Think about this from a pastor’s perspective; how “self-serving” does it sound to preach about receiving your living by preaching the Gospel? Why are tithing and sacrifice of worldly wealth in support of the Ministry of the Gospel in the top 10 most uncomfortable things for a pastor to preach about? In speaking for myself, it was because I didn’t want to come off as greedy, not appreciative of God’s call, or give the impression that I didn’t believe God would provide. I also knew there were many people who gave of their time and talents to serve the Lord in the Church by volunteering. As a pastor you begin to wonder if you should be paid at all, or should you be forced to get a “job” like everyone else, and do ministry on the side.

Yet, as I grow more from my studies, I realize God has commanded that His ministers get their living by the Gospel (1 Corinthians 9:14). He has made a way for His pastors to live unburdened by the cares of worldly pursuits. He has addressed compensation for pastors in His counsel so that pastors could teach about tithing, sacrifice, and support of the Ministry of Word and Sacrament without guilt or fear of God. Now, if God had not so clearly spoken on these matters, I may be tempted to conclude that a pastor should be forced into the modern workforce. Truth is, the only pastor who should feel guilty about receiving his living from the Gospel is the one who is lazy and doesn’t tend to shepherding- a charlatan.  Otherwise, the faithful pastor committed in his duties should have no pain of conscience, but should return to the Lord great thanks for His provisions through His people.

Remember when you read, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does He not certainly speak for our sake?” It was to the plowman’s advantage that he didn’t muzzle the ox, but ensured that he was well fed throughout his work. The ox would not be burdened in the same way with the treading of the grain since, by the work, he was also fed. Think about what great advantage it is for every congregation where their pastor’s daily bread is well cared for by them. The congregation’s advantage is that the pastor may focus on the duties for which Christ has sent and appointed him.

God didn’t make a substitute for a pastor. There isn’t a substitute for the time he devotes to the study of the Word, prayer, visitations, and preparation for weekly services. We are even told by Jesus, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” God pleads with us to pray earnestly for more pastors. We should therefore think they are needed and a blessing to have, not a burden. Also, if pastors were meant to primarily do more than concern themselves with the proclamation of the Word, intercessory prayer, and the distribution of God’s grace in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, then it would not be written that the Apostles, after their numbers had grown, spoke saying, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

The main drive of the pastors was to hold fast to the Ministry of the Word at all costs. Everything else, though important in its own right, even a good work in God’s sight, never superseded their time and efforts given to the Word. So it is that *all* members of the congregation, from young to old, *all* saints, should examine their lives and their priorities before they beset themselves against sacrificing the things which are optional. These include programs in the church, the building itself, things or habits in their own lives, or anything that might get in the way of the support of their pastor, who is the called man of God serving them with the Ministry of the Word. We are called to store up treasures in heaven for ourselves. Willingly and zealously taking care of your pastor as God commands is also a most pleasing thing in His eyes. It is a work which, when all works are exposed, will be commended by God.

Jesus, the King, will say to those sheep on His right,”‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’” And the righteous having taken no account of their actions will say, “When Lord…?” “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.’” Though all Christians are the brothers and sisters of Christ and deserve our servitude for Christ’s sake, only the pastors are referred to as the refuse of the world. “We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things” (1 Corinthians 4:13). On the last day, those who are perishing, who saw your tithes and offerings as wasted money, will be shown to be the fools, for they will be shown their empty worth and treasure as the world burns up with fire. But you, who saw Christ, heard Christ, and received Christ through the least of these His brothers, and supported them, not like the scum and refuse of the world, but as those worthy of double honor, will be rewarded by Christ Himself.

