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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
9/13/2009, for Holy Cross Sunday
1 Corinthians 1:18-24, John 3:13-17
The Cross and the Spirit

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our Epistle Reading, from Chapter One of St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The apostle speaks of the foolishness of the Cross. Foolishness, aye, but foolishness that shall save the world:

²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:22-24, RSV)

THE BAPTISM OF DASHIELL JOSEPH TOTA

Following this sermon, it will be our joy to baptize little Dashiell Joseph Tota. They call him Dash -- his parents, Amy and Jon, call him Dash.

I fear that my tongue shall fail to express how dramatic, how moving, and how hopeful for our world it is that young Dash is being baptized. For when he is baptized, he thereby becomes Christ's man, and it is bound to be a blessing for him, for his family, and for our world that he should be such a man.

Many of you have seen baptisms here at Immanuel. Dash's parents and godparents will make solemn promises on his behalf, and then we will baptize Dash with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Then follow a series of liturgical actions meant to complete the baptism and to spell out the meaning of baptism. For example, I place a few grains of salt on his lips and recite the words our Lord, "You are the salt of the earth." I give him a baptismal candle, along with the words, "You are the light of the world."

But before we get to the salt and the candle, there is a brief rite called the "signing with the cross." I dip my thumb in the baptismal oil, trace the sign of the cross on Dash's forehead, and speak these words to him:

Dashiell, child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

These are the two parts of my sermon this morning: I want to speak of being "sealed with the Holy Spirit," and being "marked with the cross of Christ forever."

THE MARK OF THE CROSS

Let me begin with the mark of the Cross. To develop and to rejoice in the mark of the Cross, let me mention how wonderful it is to see the ordination of a

seminarian into the holy office of the ministry. Most ordinations are performed by the bishop with the clergy surrounding the ordinand. So it was, for example, when our former Assistant Pastor Patti Welch was ordained. She knelt before the bishop, who placed his hands on her head, clergy close at hand, like Pastor Elise Brown and me, also laid a hand on her head, and two hundred clergy looking on said Amen and would have laid their hands on her too if there had been room enough for it.

Why is this? Why this desire to reach out and touch the young one being ordained? Well, from a theological point of view, the presence of the surrounding clergy is meant to express the conviction that the seminarian is being ordained into a fellowship of clergy, that she is not free to invent the Gospel or the sacraments, but must remain mindful of the larger church, including clergy of old in the communion of saints.

But there is a personal side to it too. The hand of the older clergy reaching out and touching the younger one is a kind of personal testimony to the ordinand that we have been where she now kneels. We have been there, and we do not regret a thing, but rather welcome her into a ministry we cherish.

So it is now with the baptism of little Dash. If the people of this congregation arrayed ourselves according to the impulses of our hearts, many of us would gather around young Dash when he is baptized. We would touch him and testify that like him, we too have received the mark of the Cross, we do not regret it, but welcome him into what Luther called “the priesthood of all believers.”

Consider our sister in the Lord Ann Siemer, for example. The flowers on our altar this morning are given in honor of her ninety years of continuous membership here at Immanuel. It is a chief blessing for our congregation that she has been with us so long, and many of you could recount in detail the blessing she has been for you personally.

But in heaven’s eyes, the great thing about Ann’s ninety years is not just the blessing for Immanuel, but the blessing for all reality that Ann should have been marked with the sign of the Cross and then lived *with integrity* with that Cross. In concrete detail, in thousands of days now and in ten thousand doings and refrainings, Ann has lived under the protection of Christ’s cross. She has been a Christian -- one who has taken up her cross and followed Jesus -- and she means to continue a Christian henceforth.

ST. PAUL

In this morning’s Epistle Lesson, St. Paul admits that what Ann has done and continues to do, and what Dash now commences, is “folly to the Greeks.” Let me try to explain why.

From your history classes, recall that Greek civilization had existed and flourished long before St. Paul came preaching Christ. This was the civilization of the great writers of tragedy Aeschylus¹ and Sophocles² and of the philosophers

¹ c. 525 BC/524 BC – c. 456 BC/455 BC

Socrates³, Plato⁴, and Aristotle⁵. All of these thinkers had lived long before the birth of Jesus.

The city state of Corinth was heir to the elegant Greek tradition of rhetoric, including the great Athenian orator Demosthenes⁶. As the Book of Acts says of the Athenians, so could be said of the Corinthians:

²¹Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. (Acts 17:21, RSV)

They loved to discourse about many things. They observed careful conceptual thinking and practiced the arts of persuasion in their schools of rhetoric.

Yet it was not to the family of Greek intellectuals that Christ had been born, but to the mother of Jewish village maiden. And it was not to Greek orators that the message of the gospel was entrusted, but to fisherman and tax collectors and other lowly folk. From a scholarly point of view, the most impressive of the apostles was probably St. Paul, but Paul seems not to have met the high standards of the Greeks. In his Second Lesson to the Corinthians, St. Paul admits that his reputation as an orator was weak in the eyes of the Greeks:

For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible. (2 Corinthians 10:10, KJV)

So, that was one problem for the Corinthians: in their eyes, Christian preachers were unimpressive orators.

But the larger problem was the *message* of the Christian preachers. It sounded like nonsense to the Greeks. What! Could it be true that the Christians were hanging their hopes of a Saviour who could not even save himself? Could it be true that the Christians were counting on a man who had died the death of a condemned criminal? Were the Christians putting their faith in a loser? It made no sense to the elegant Greeks. It was folly in their eyes, as St. Paul admits.

And yet it was this folly that has conquered the world! Let us make no mistake about it, let us not underestimate the wonder of the thing: the Christian faith is this world's true revolution! The message of the fisherman has overturned the world, and made it a better place. For what St. John says in this morning's Gospel Lesson has won many a heart:

² c. 496 BC-406 BC

³ 469 BC-399 BC

⁴ 428/427 BC - 348/347 BC

⁵ 384 BC - 322 BC

⁶ Also 384 BC-322 BC, same as Aristotle.

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16, RSV)

Christians are the bearers of a fundamental notion - one that has transformed the world: that the love of Jesus conquers all. We believe that that love that spares not itself, but is willing to give to others all the way to exhaustion is ultimately the love that shall win the day. That is, Christians, high and low, from the earliest days of the Church to this very day, have believed that reality is on the side of Jesus and of his ways.

When little Dash is baptized, he will be marked with the sign of the Cross. Thereby he will be claimed for Christ. The Cross is both his protection in this world and in all eternity, and his call to Christian love throughout his life.

SEALED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

The hour hastens on. Let me speak briefly of the other part of the saying. I mean, the sealing with the Holy Spirit:

Dashiell, child of God, you have been *sealed with the Holy Spirit* and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

Young Dash is soon to be anointed with baptism oil in the shape of the Cross of Christ. Thereby he shall be anointed, as the shepherd boy David was anointed to be the king of Israel. We shall “confirm” Dash. That is, as pastor I shall lay my hands on his head and pray for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in the life of this child. Dash shall wear a seal. We hope he will bear it all the days of his life. We want him to be marked by the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus was soon to depart from his disciples, he promised them a Comforter:

⁷Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. (John 17:7, KJV. See also John 14 and 15)

Who could blame the disciples if they had interpreted this to mean that Jesus was to raise up another person *like himself* to continue teaching them and encouraging them? This Comforter, this Advocate, this Paraclete: would he not be a good, old-fashioned person like Jesus, someone they could walk with and talk with? But that is not the kind of Comforter Jesus meant. He meant rather *he himself* was coming to dwell within the heart of all Christians. He is to be with them both externally in the Blessed Sacrament and internally in their hearts.

This is our chief treasure on this earth: that Jesus is willing to abide with us, to make a home with us, to suggest, to correct, to guide us.

Oh! Let us not harden our hearts to the Holy Spirit! Let us not dishonor the Spirit by misusing the body in which he lives:

¹⁹What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? ²⁰For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, KJV)

Far from this, far from hardening our hearts to Christ's Spirit within us, let us seek to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus. Let us yield to his suggestions, to his corrections, to his shepherding, for it shall certainly be for our good, for the good of our neighbors, and for the glory of his name, to whom belongs glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.