If you should like a title for this sermon I call it “A Sermon for David.” I mean David Dodsworth. He is being baptized here at Immanuel this morning. Vicar Caleb Douglas and I have prepared David for baptism by leading him through Luther’s Small Catechism. Caleb and I are particularly moved by this baptism because David is the first of those we met at the Pastor’s Booth who is giving himself to Jesus and Jesus to him through baptism. This, then, is a sermon meant to strengthen David and each of us in our life as baptized Christians.

My text for this sermon comes from our Epistle Lesson, from Philippians Chapter 4. St. Paul is writing and he speaks of “gentleness.” Verses four and five go this way:

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. (Philippians 4:4-5, NRSV)

When you get to know David Dodsworth you will discover him to be a gentle person. When St. Paul says, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone,” that is a natural for David. Gentleness seems to come easy for David. But in this sermon I want to increase the foundation for gentleness in both David and you and me. I want to strengthen our gentleness by speaking of Jesus.

There are various ways of translating the underlying Greek word (epieikes) our text puts as “gentleness.” That is the way the New Revised Standard Version puts it, gentleness. Other translations use the words “moderation” (KJV) or “forbearance” (RSV). It is a good trait of the soul. It means that the person is fair, mild, equitable, open to reason and talking things out. All these good traits are meant to be included when I speak of “gentleness” in this sermon.

Let me approach my subject from three angles. First, let me present Christ to you as the foundation and very image of Christian gentleness. To belong to Christ means that bit by bit we should come to resemble him. If so, we shall become a more gentle people. Second, let me speak of why gentleness is so important in our world. We live in a world with much fussing and fighting, conflict and discourtesy. In such a discordant world, Christian gentleness helps smooth things along in the city and helps draw others to Christ too. And
finally I want to linger with that short sentence St. Paul offers in connection to his words about gentleness. That short sentence goes this way:

The Lord is near. (Philippians 4:5, NRSV)

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone,” says the apostle, “The Lord is near.” Let us continue in gentleness, then, until that good day when gentleness will be entirely easy for us in Christ’s kingdom. The Lord is near!

So, my first point: Jesus Christ is the foundation and very image of gentleness for us. There is a lovely saying of Martin Luther describing the Christian life. I have commended this saying to many people when they were being baptized, and now, David, I commend it to you: we are to be what Luther called “little Christs” to our neighbors. We are not Christ himself. In this fallen world, we always fall short of that high standard. But, as best we can, we should be little Christs to our neighbors. In our conduct toward them, we should bear some resemblance to our Savior. We should provide for our neighbors some glimpse, some image, of what Jesus is like. In your Baptism, David, Jesus is, as it were, passing along the Sea of Galilee. He sees you and bids you come. “Follow me, David.” You are up and doing so. In your following then, make it part of your life to practice the gentleness we find in our Lord Jesus. Be a little Christ to your neighbors.

It is a recurring theme in the Psalms that our God is gracious. For example, in Psalm 145, we read this:

8The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy. 9The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works. (Psalm 145:8-9, KJV)

This is the gentleness of the Lord of which Jonah complained a few Sundays back. The Lord seemed too good, too compassionate, in the eyes of Jonah. Well, this Lord of whom Jonah complains is Jesus. In the fullness of time we find him to be the gentle One – the One whose tender mercies are over all his works.

Even when Jesus was rejected and scourged and buffeted and hammered to the cross, there was still the gentleness about him that put people in mind of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7, RSV)
And when he at last did speak, his gentleness was evident to all: “Father, forgive.” Now St. Paul turns to all the baptized and appeals to us, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.”

Being a Christian is no bed of roses. Baptism does not guarantee that life will be easy. The life of a Christian might well have its own fair share of suffering. But if there should be suffering, let Christian gentleness still shine forth. Think of the words of St. Peter concerning his Master, Jesus Christ. That foremost disciple wrote this concerning Jesus:

21...Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:21-23, RSV)

Likewise, the apostle who urges us to “Let your gentleness be known to everyone,” has himself known a rough life. I mean St. Paul. By tradition he is writing this letter to the Philippians from jail. And that is no fun. In addition to the hardship of jail, there is the uncertainty of how things will all work out. And for St. Paul they worked out with his martyrdom. Still, it is this man who writes his gentle letter to the Philippians, and he urges gentleness in all Christians – a gentleness that puts people in mind of Jesus.

So, that is my first point: Jesus is the foundation and the very image of the kind of gentleness that should adorn the Christian.

My second theme is that Christian gentleness is needful in our world. It seems to me that life in America has become irritable and explosive. When I was a young man, for example, I once wrote an opinion piece to the Washington Post. I was living in the DC area, I had been studying ethics in graduate school, and I figured that I had something to contribute to the moral and social discourse of those times. I do not even recall what I wrote about or whether the Washington Post published my piece. But my point is simply that back then it did not seem so wrong, so daring, to simply express an opinion. But I do not think about writing to any newspaper these days. The times seem too tense. Perhaps many of us are becoming quiet. We can discuss the weather and maybe the National Football League, but moral opinions and the things we care most about… well, some of us are becoming hesitant. We wonder, who needs the grief that comes from speaking? But all of this amounts to saying that we need some more gentleness in our land. Let your gentleness be known by all, says St. Paul. It will help our city along.

Stepping back, and broadening the horizon, let us note the connection in our text between St. Paul’s appeal to gentleness and his call to Christians to
rejoice. In fact, the apostle doubles up on his call to rejoice. And so we read this:

4Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. (Philippians 4:4-5, NRSV)

Let us note that St. Paul is not urging us to rejoice in our sorrows and setbacks and disappointments. That would be an odd thing to do, and probably unhealthy. If we are sick or injured or poor or heartbroken, the apostle is not asking us to rejoice in these burdens. Rather, he is asking us to rejoice in Jesus! “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” That is, even in the midst of sorrows and suffering, let us rejoice in Jesus, because Jesus means that the sorrows and sufferings will one day be lost in a great forgetfulness and will be replaced by joy.

In our First Lesson, from Isaiah chapter 25, the prophet speaks of the time when the “shroud” shall be lifted from humanity. And so we read these words:

7And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations;
8he will swallow up death forever.

There is a cloud, my friends, cast over the world. It is the shadow of death. Our years are limited, our time available for taking care of our families and for accomplishing our life’s work... well, that time is running out. Death and all of its signals are drawing nearer, and in such a situation it often becomes hard to be gentle. When we are pressed in life and fearful and frustrated, then it is hard to comply with the words of the apostle, “let your gentleness be known to everyone.” And so the apostle would have us lift our eyes from the troubles of this present season and instead look to Jesus. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

And so, David, I say to you and to all the baptized, that we should continue in gentleness even when we are hard-pressed because no matter what, we have the right to rejoice in Jesus. He is well able to do what we cannot. His strength continues when ours runs out. We can afford to be gentle in this world because we have a Savior in whom we can rejoice.

And now we come to my last point about gentleness. St. Paul follows up his call to gentleness with the simple words, “The Lord is near.” We do not know exactly when Jesus is going to come again to this earth. We know that when he returns he will do so with power and glory, and he will rid reality of sin, death, and the devil, and that will be a great day! But we do not know when that will be. Not even the angels in heaven know that date, but only God the
Father. We do not know the date, I say, but we do know this: when Jesus returns, we want to be found practicing gentleness in his name. It would be embarrassing, it just would not be fitting for disciples to be found fussing and fighting, cursing and yelling, grabbing each other by the throat and by the hair, when Jesus comes again. And he is coming soon. That is what St. Paul does not neglect to say when talking about gentleness. The Lord is near. Soon these days of conflict and irritability are going to give way to a kingdom of peace. Let the baptized be pointing toward that kingdom of peace in the conduct of our lives here and now.

I close with this thought: there is another sense to the saying, “The Lord is near.” This other sense is not temporal, but rather, spatial. Right here and now, in this liturgy where even more than two or three are gathered together in Christ’s name, the Lord is near. God the Father has invited us to the marriage feast of his Son, as our Gospel Lesson puts it. Jesus Christ is near enough to notice us. He is near enough to notice whether we bring an explosive temperament with us to church. He is near enough to notice if we have intentions to hurt others. He is near and close at hand, and soon we get up from our pews and walk into his very presence. Each time we do that, let us fashion ourselves into people who are more like him in the gentleness of our lives. Let our gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near (pointing to the Table), to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen