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Pentecost 06, July 9, 2023

“Marked by the Cross”

Read: Romans 6: 1b - 11 and/or memorize: Romans 6:

A grandma, and her little granddaughter, Jennifer, were sitting, talking. Jennifer was four years old. She turned to grandma and said, “Is the cross still there?” I didn’t hear her reply to the little girl. But since grandma is a Christian, active in her parish and informed about the Christian faith, I’m sure she gave a positive answer.

I’m sure it went something like this, “Yes, Jennifer, the cross is still there.” She might have added, “You can’t see it, but it’s still there and it will always be there. In your baptism, you have been marked by the cross of Christ forever.” Whichever way she said it, she would be right on both counts, of course.

The cross of Christ, the sign of God’s new covenant with us in Jesus, is invisible. It cannot be seen with the naked eye; it’s traced on your forehead with a finger, dipped in oil as we do, though some use the very waters of baptism. It doesn’t stay visible for very long at all. The “mark” of the cross in baptism is not meant to be visible as if it were a brand applied to some animal.

Nation Geographic had a special about a study of polar bears. They were trying to learn how they were coping with the infringement of modern culture upon their environment. The hunter/scientists doing the study used a helicopter to locate and anesthetize a large polar bear; they guarded it, waited until the bear was helpless on the snow and ice and then swooped down and conducted their examination.

They measured the bear, checked its teeth, took blood samples and fitted it with a tracking collar. They took great care to allow for the seasonal weight gain that occurs in these animals during the summer. The last thing they did was spray paint a large number 25 on its back, which was highly visible from the air. As they watched, the animal regained its feet and ran away.

In contrast, the mark of the cross, God’s covenant with us, is invisible and can never be seen with the naked eye. The mark of the cross on the foreheads of the baptized is a sign of death and new life in Jesus, but it is and always will be invisible.

Now here’s a conundrum. The mark of the cross may be invisible, but it is also indelible. It is always there. Perhaps, when you were growing up, you learned to make invisible ink and you would write messages. Then, by placing a heat source underneath it, they would become visible. So it is with the cross that is applied to us. It has always been invisible because the death of Christ has been written into our hearts and souls.

At the same time, the memory of that cross being put there is dull. The “cross-mark” of baptism, the invisible sign of an execution that took place in public, is indelible because it is the mark of Jesus’ suffering and sacrifice for the salvation of all people, for all time. It is not an abstract thing. The cross is the sign that a man, Jesus, the very Son of God, was actually crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem.

It is, to those who know and believe the Gospel, a sign that is traced in blood. It can never be erased from the hearts and minds of those who believe that Jesus is the Living Lord because the Holy Spirit has “sealed” us in a permanent relationship with that Lord.

Barbara Schmich, a liturgist who is associated with the Notre Dame Center for Personal and Pastoral Liturgy, is also the mother of three children. She tells how her three-year-old son became aware of the crucifix, which is a cross with a body on it. He would stop, look and declare, “Jesus is dead.” She realized, after a while, that he was making a request, rather than a statement and was really seeking information.

So, whenever he said, “Jesus is dead,” she would respond, “Yes, Jesus did die on a cross, but he rose from the dead. He is alive and with us still.” One day he saw a very large outdoor crucifix and said, very loudly in public, “Jesus is dead.” Schmich continues, “Not knowing what to say anymore and feeling a certain embarrassment at the poverty of representations of the pascal mystery, responded, ‘Yes, He looks dead.’ to her little boy.

He got very serious and “took her face in his hands and looked straight into her eyes, his own wide with sudden realization. He spoke in a hushed voice as if telling her a secret, “Maybe they don’t know He’s alive.”

God burns the cross into our consciousness through the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection. That is why the mark is indelible. The “mark of the cross” is still there, even as it was, when we were baptized. His death and resurrection have made it indelible.

Over the years I have sought to help you connect to that cross. We do it in various ways. When we did the “Liturgy of the Ordinary,” we moved the baptismal font to the entry door. It was my hope that, as you passed by that font, you might dip your fingers in and make the sign of the cross, just as it was made in your baptism, to remind yourself of that baptism. It may seem unimportant, yet I think anything we do to remind ourselves of the cross is truly important.

A man tells of two chapels at Lutheran Northwest Seminary. Both chapels have baptismal fonts outside their main entrances. They remind those who enter that they were marked by the cross of Christ, invisibly and indelibly, when they were baptized.

A professor tells of a guest asking a question which, he suspects, many others also wondered about, “Why does a theological seminary need a baptismal font? Is it ever used?” The professor answered that it really is used.

There are times when the children of students or other persons are baptized. But he also wanted to remind him that the font needs to be there, not only so that the liturgical appointments of the chapel are complete, but to remind all worshipers that they have been “marked with the cross of Christ forever.”

All who are baptized belong to their Heavenly Father and what happens between the walls of a church, as well as the world, is His business. I think that’s one of the reasons I encouraged you to use that font to make the sign of the cross for yourself, to remind yourself of that.

The font reminds us that everything that happens is part of God’s business. We are joined to that business through the waters of baptism as we were joined to Jesus in His death and resurrection. The

mark of the cross is indelible; it cannot be washed away or removed by time, because the very Spirit of the Risen Lord makes it indelible.

One other thing must be said about the sign of the cross that “marks us” in baptism. It is also an illuminated cross. Perhaps, you grew up in a church that had a cross that was lit up, shining out into the world. When such is the case, it really is accomplishing two things: It is a sign and message to all who worship there.

It says to the members: Jesus, in His death and resurrection became the true light of the world, which cannot be extinguished. Second, it proclaims, “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father, which is in heaven.”

A pastor was telling about a favorite chair in his den which is a reminder of the illumination. He has an obstinate three-way lamp. When he turns it on, it burns properly for a while, but then will begin to flicker as if one of the elements will go out so that he might think that the bulb is burned out.

However, he has learned that if he unscrews the bulb; then screws it back into the socket, it burns brightly once again, but, before long it may go out entirely. He sees that bulb as a parable of the Christian life. It reminds him that his “illuminated cross” has a tendency to flicker and go out. It takes the Word and the Holy Spirit to keep the flame of faith burning brightly through his life and witness in the world.

Cross-marked people are called to live lives of love and service to their Lord as a response to Jesus’ death and resurrection. They tell the world that God loves them and they are to love all people. When we let that light shine through us, the cross of Christ is illuminated. It lights up so that others may know that Jesus is Lord and has made us children of God.

Our part of the baptismal covenant is to live our lives to God’s glory, lighting up the cross. Many of us were baptized as babies, as is our Lutheran tradition, but our lives should reflect that light no matter when we were baptized. That cross, illuminated by the loving and dedicated service of God’s people, becomes the sign of new life and hope for the world in our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, dear Christians friends, “the cross is still on your forehead;” as it always will be. God put it there; though it is invisible to the eye, it is indelible. To those who don’t believe it appears to be a sign of death and darkness. Yet, to those who are called according to His purpose it is a sign of life and hope.

That baptismal cross is illuminated for all to see as we live out our covenant as children of God. Everyone who is baptized in the name of the “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” is marked with that cross of Christ forever. You can’t wash it off. You can’t rub it off. It will always be there. The question for you is, Will you let the light of the cross shine through you?

Count me in: How will you let the cross of Christ shine through your life?