



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

7th Sunday of Easter: June 2, 2019

Sermon Title: “More than a Pencil Mark”

Sermon Text: Acts 16:16-34

There’s a door frame in Linda’s childhood house that’s covered in pencil marks. Each one is dated and charts the growth of kids and grandkids. As long as Linda’s parents live there, those marks will never be painted over, because each scribble helps them remember growth and progress. Yet as special as those pencil marks are, they are just a moment in time. We *mark* and then we *move on*. That’s fine and well when we’re measuring height, but not when it comes to our faith life.

We perform a lot of baptisms here at Grace, and I treasure every one of them. But there’s always the risk that we might approach baptism as the churchly equivalent of a pencil mark on the wall: something we check off as just one of life’s little accomplishments, like baby’s first tooth or a toddler’s first steps. But isn’t baptism so much more than that? Isn’t it more than a pencil mark on a doorframe?

In his Large Catechism, Martin Luther writes that “the effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is that it saves... [In baptism we are] delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into Christ’s kingdom, and to live with him forever.”¹ What a remarkable gift! Isn’t *that* worthy of regular celebration and reflection? And yet we rarely do. Maybe it’s because baptism seems like something that only *really* matters after we die. And so instead we focus on more *tangible* things, like our work, our hobbies, and whether James Holzhauer will *ever* lose on Jeopardy. Baptism can seem as inconsequential as a pencil line – just a moment in time we’ve *marked* and from which we’ve *moved on*. But understood in fullness, baptism is a *daily* blessing that can become a central influence on how we think, act, live, and see the world. Today’s reading from Acts brings this into focus by offering us four ways that God transforms our daily lives through baptism.

First, as baptized Christians, God daily calls us to lives of prayer and worship. Did you notice how our story from Acts begins? Paul and Silas were on their way to the “place of prayer.” The day we’re baptized should *not* be the last day we ever enter a church. In those baptismal waters we enter into a new relationship with *God*, all of *God’s creation*, and all of *God’s children*. And in those new relationships, we have the potential to see God, each other and the world in a *new way* – a way in which everything bears the sacred fingerprints of our Lord. Moreover, in baptism Jesus publicly declares his eternal, unconditional love for us. Prayer and worship is a foundational way for us to *respond* by loving God back, and a critical means by which God transforms us from the inside out.

Second, when we're baptized, God calls us to the Way of love even when it's inconvenient. As Paul and Silas were on their way to the place of prayer, they encountered a slave girl. This girl was *doubly* enslaved; she had not only a human master but a demonic master - an evil spirit that controlled her and turned her into a demonic fortune teller.

For days she followed them around, declaring that they were men of God who had a message of salvation. Such flattery can be intoxicating. And in some strange way, she might have even been helpful to their cause. But Paul and Silas couldn't be committed to their mission for Jesus if they were dependent upon the girl's enslavement. And so Paul ordered the demon to leave the girl so that she could follow her *true* king, Jesus Christ, and so that their message of hope and liberation wouldn't be enslaved by popular parlor tricks and the world's empty adulation.

We too must avoid cultivating the flattery and trendy, empty promises of our world. In the waters of baptism God calls us to take the Good News of Jesus Christ to *places* where it might not be welcome and to *people* who might make us uncomfortable. God calls us to love *all* of God's people.

Third, as baptized Christians, God daily calls us to follow the cross. Paul and Silas faced tremendous opposition after they freed the girl. Her owners were outraged because no longer could they profit from her demonically-inspired fortune telling skills. And so they stirred up the authorities and the crowd in order to get revenge on Paul and Silas. It worked. Paul and Silas were brutally beaten and imprisoned.

This story reminds us that our troubles don't all go away just because we've been baptized. Being baptized doesn't guarantee that everyone is going to like you, that everyone will treat you fairly, or that everything in life is going to come easily. In fact, even before our foreheads are dry, the call to take up our cross and follow Christ echoes in our ears. And when we do so, we run the risk that some of our friends may turn their back on us. When we take Jesus seriously, people who once were close to us might abandon us, oppose us, and even mock us. That's because living a life of discipleship changes the way you live. Your priorities shift. You might have a little less leisure as you respond to God's love by sharing your time. And you might have a little less money as you respond to God's grace by blessing others with the blessings you have received.

But Christ helps us navigate these changes and bear any suffering by *transforming it*, just as he transformed the cross - a tool of intimidation and torture - into a means of liberation and new life. And in that transformation, Christ blesses us to envision *hope* where others can only see *despair*, and empowers us to find *opportunity* where others can only perceive *obstacles*.

As Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns of praise in that jail, God blessed them so they could experience their surroundings with new eyes. Their cell became a cathedral. Their stocks and chains became their pews. Their fellow prisoners became a congregation. And in the midst of faithful prayers and heartfelt hymns, the ground began to shake and the prison walls turned to rubble. But Paul and Silas didn't run away. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they stayed, much to the relief and shock of the jailer, who was prepared to take his own life in order to avoid

the disgrace of losing his prisoners. Paul and Silas were in just the right *place* at just the right *time* to share God's Word with the jailer and his family. God had transformed an unjust imprisonment into an opportunity for new disciples.

Is God providing unexpected opportunities to us? Is God placing us in an unanticipated place at what seems to be an inopportune time because someone is there, waiting to hear a word of Christ from us? In baptism, God calls us *daily* to follow the cross and to be transformed, so that *daily* we can be instruments of transformation in the lives of others.

This leads to my final point. As baptized Christians, we are daily called to live as joyful people truly liberated by Christ. So many people were freed in our story from the Book of Acts. The girl was freed from a demon. Paul and Silas were freed from prison. But perhaps the most profound act of liberation was when the jailer and his entire family were baptized. In that baptism they were freed from the power of sin and death and joined to the Body of Christ. And as we read in the very last verse of our lesson, the family's response was to *rejoice*. We too should rejoice, for in *our* baptism we *also* have been liberated by Christ so that by his grace we can participate in the liberation of others.

Friends, no pencil mark on a doorframe can ever express the full magnitude and miracle of baptism. And so *every day*, remember what Christ has done. He has claimed us. He has washed us. He has redeemed us. *We are baptized and so we are free! Every day! Amen.*

Citations:

1. *Luther's Large Catechism*, Fourth Part (Baptism), p. 459.