

SEPTEMBER 7, 2008
PENTECOST 17
HOLY BAPTISM
“PUT ON CHRIST”

One of the new hymns in our red ELW is a song by Susan Cherwien that I've used for weddings but not yet for a baptism. Let it stand as my prayer for today as we welcome little Lila in becoming one with us as she “puts on Christ” in the waters of baptism:

*Beloved, God's chosen,
Put on as a garment compassion,
Forgiveness, and goodness of heart.
Above all, before all,
Let love be your raiment
That binds into one
Ev'ry dissonant part.*

I pray this for Lila and for us in Jesus' name. Amen.

Mark Allen Powell, one of my favorite NT scholars who teaches at Trinity

Seminary, in one of his books entitled Loving Jesus mentions in joking fashion Jesus' concluding words in today's Gospel reading, "*For where two or three are gathered in his name, I am there among them.*" This passage, he writes, "has a history of tongue-in-cheek application in the church. Pastors and other leaders love to quote it at poorly attended church meetings to indicate a quorum" as in "we may not have many here tonight, but Jesus said he would be present even when no more than two or three gather in his name, so I guess we have enough." You've heard that kind of comment. "Well, yes," Powell observes, "but the point of the reference" isn't how few it takes for Jesus' presence to be felt, but how many—quite the opposite. "It takes *at least* two or three, which is to say, more than one. The presence of our risen Lord Jesus Christ is not realized in any one individual but, definitively, in the fellowship

or interaction, the community or koinonia “that takes place **between** individuals.”

That’s a good Gospel note to sound today as we gather for the baptism of little Lila, which is not some private rite of passage between her and God, or even just an intimate family affair. But Lila is baptized here in the midst of the church gathered for “public” worship and we will all have a role in the promise-making and confessing and professing of the baptismal creed that will go on around her—insensible as she may be as a new born to just what is going on around her—and within her—as she is washed in the water together with the Word of God, which is what brother Martin of Wittenberg taught us is what baptism **essentially** is. Our faith, in a sense, stands in for Lila in saying “yes” to God’s promises by the power of the Holy Spirit while affirming our intention to help raise Lila within this communal Christian faith—doing all we can to see to it that she “lives among

God’s faithful people,” that she’s brought to the word of God and the holy supper,” that she’s taught “the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments,” that the holy scriptures are “placed in her hands, that she is nurtured in faith and prayer—all in order that she may learn “to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.”

You, Kristen and Michael, and you her baptismal sponsors, Emily and Kevin, bear the strongest responsibility for keeping these promises, but so does the rest of your family and friends, as well as all of us who gather here in this place for worship and then scatter throughout the week in our daily callings to be “Christ for one another” as Luther put it.

St. Paul, in our second reading from the letter to the Church at Rome from which we’ve been reading all summer, begins, you may have noticed, by sounding much like

the Paul from I Corinthians 13 which we so often hear read at weddings. Here Paul begins: “*Owe no one anything*” — the original Greek actually has a double negative — owe no one nothing! — “*except*” — nothing EXCEPT “*to love one another; for the one who loves one another has fulfilled the law.*” And then quoting Jesus directly, which Paul curiously seldom is found doing, he quotes Jesus’ own citation of the Mosaic law which he once famously followed by his parable of a “good Samaritan: “*love your neighbor as yourself,*” concluding with this observation: “***Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.***”

Five times in three short verses we find the word “love” mentioned—love as the beginning and the end of the law. “All you need is love,” as the Beatles so memorably taught us to sing forty years ago, although the “love” they sang of was more of a “silly, little love song” than the full-throated love

of God and neighbor of which Paul sings—that “genuine love” of which we heard in last week’s reading and sermon from the preceding chapter of Romans in which he began, remember, “*Let love be genuine*” and concluded “*do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*”

You may have missed it, but it’s really baptismal language that Paul is invoking at the very end of today’s reading where he concludes with what may strike us as a rather peculiar turn of phrase, “***Put on the Lord Jesus Christ***” after having just two verses earlier said, “*Lay aside the works of darkness and **put on the armor of light.***” “Putting on” is baptismal language, you see, an old Greek word that means “to wear” or “to don” as we sometimes say—like “putting on” your dress in the morning or pulling on your pants—or maybe, more to the point of little Lila—“putting on” her special white baptismal dress which

symbolizes her “putting on” of Christ in the waters of baptism. (Not a “put on,” of course in the sense of a deception.) It’s not one of our traditions here, but our ELW, you’ll notice, in small red letters contains this rubric, this little suggestion, at the top of p. 231 in our newly revised baptismal liturgy, “*Clothed with Christ in baptism, the newly baptized may receive a baptismal garment.*”

I will, as the rubrics suggest, “mark the sign of the cross on the forehead” of Lila while saying “*Lila, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever*” followed by words of welcome and encouragement spoken on all of our behalf: “*let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven*” as a lighted candle is given to Lila’s sponsors.

These rites, you see, help to underline for us all that this is no mere naming

ceremony or rite of passage or dedication that we're on about here—significant as such actions may be. But, as we sang in our entrance hymn which is the hymn we sing as our entrance hymn every Easter we are gathering here today because “*We know that Christ is raised and dies no more,*” words we also often sing at our funerals. For, as the second verse goes on to sing:

*We share by **water** in his saving death.
Reborn we share with him an Easter life,
As living members of our Savior Christ.*

And then the third:

*The Father's splendor clothes the Son
with life,
The Spirit's fission shakes the church of
God.*

***Baptized** we live with God the Three in
One.”*

This is what really happens at baptism—we “**put on**” Christ, the crucified and now risen, Jesus Christ, whom God “clothes” in the splendor of his Easter

life—life from the grave—with which we too are clothed in baptism. And all this is God’s doing—and not our own—the “*Spirit’s fission shaking the church of God.*”

I don’t know how many of you saw the old Coen brothers’ movie, “O Brother Where Art Thou” of some years back now, starring George Clooney and a couple of his ex-con buddies on the lam from prison. Maybe more of you have heard the very popular sound track to the movie that featured all kinds of old-time hill-billy music including the song “Down to the River to Pray” that our choir sang us a version of earlier. It’s a lovely scene as suddenly the three convicts hiding out in the woods observe a whole crowd of folks appearing seemingly out of nowhere all flowing down toward the river where baptisms of the authentic dunking variety are being held—a scene so alluring that one of Clooney’s fellow escapees decides to join the festivities and get himself

baptized—despite his fudging a bit on confessing just what he'd done wrong!

But the climax of the movie itself comes at the very end as the three escaped convicts are about to be killed but instead a raging flood intervenes—I think it's a burst dam if I remember right. It floods the scene and the three of them come bobbing to the top like corks—the waters of the flood becoming the means of their saving—of their “salvation,” of their redemption, if you will.

So it is, sisters and brothers, that God saves us through the water and the Word, clothing us in Christ, in the “armor of light” which is love. Welcome everyone—especially little Lila—to the love of God.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.