

**The Birthmark**  
**A Sermon for All Saints Sunday with the Rite of Confirmation**  
**Sunday, November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010**  
**Ephesians 1:11-23 and Luke 6:20-31**

*O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.*

Staci and Karin and Jake and Nina and Kristian and Katie and Carrie, with Paul's words to the Ephesians, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power."

Some know that I've long been a big fan of Gary Larson's *Farside* cartoons since my seminary days when some of us would gather at breakfast every morning to browse the Minneapolis Star Tribune for the latest of Larson's lampoons. In one of my favorites, there are two deer standing in a forest apparently having a conversation during hunting season. We notice that one of the deer has a big red and white target grown into the white patch of fur just beneath its nose. The other deer takes a long look at the target and finally shakes his head and says, "Bummer of a birthmark, Hal . . . Bummer of a birthmark."

Do you suppose the same could be said about the birthmark of our baptism, the brand of Jesus' cross upon our hearts, the imprint of his death and resurrection upon our lives? "Blessed are you who are poor. . . ," Jesus says today. "Blessed are you who are hungry now. . . ," he told his followers. "Blessed are you who weep now. . . ," he dared to say. "[And] blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man." This is what Jesus tells his followers. Now, are you still ready to have your faith confirmed? Are you still prepared to affirm the promises of your baptism? "[And] blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man?"

You see, the cross can be a bummer of a birthmark. When these young persons, seated before us today, were baptized, they, like the rest of us, were branded—branded with the cross of Jesus Christ, marked upon their foreheads with the water of the basin and emblazoned upon their hearts by the fire of the Holy Spirit. And each of them was Christened, Staci and Karin and Jake and Nina and Kristian and Katie and Carrie were given the new name of Christ. They were "Christed," Christened. God branded you, making you his own in Holy Baptism, sealing you with the Holy Spirit, and marking you with the cross of Christ forever.

Now what do you do when you're branded? The rap artist, Busta Rhymes, as some of you know, I'm sure, asks the question in some of his lyrics, "What do you do when you're branded, marked with a coward's shame. . . ." Alan Alch, who, by the way, originally composed those lyrics, asked that question in the opening theme song for the 60s television western series called *Branded* in which Chuck Connors plays the role of a court marshaled cavalry officer.

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Cattle ranchers know that once the brand is seared into the hide, there's no getting rid of it, no hiding it, no denying it; and all a cattle rustler can do is try to change the shape of the brand.

The brand marks who we belong to and whose we shall always be. Jesus, who bore the very imprint of God, Jesus was seared with the brand of humanity when he suffered and died *for you . . . for you and your salvation*, whether you like it or not, whether you want it or not, whether you show it or are

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ashamed of it. You're branded, and there's nothing you can do to change that. You are his beloved child forever, even though you may say one day, “No, I'm not, and I want nothing to do with the church,” you still belong to him. “So that wherever you go for the rest of your life,” as the lyrics say, “you will not need to prove to them all . . .” that you're a man or a woman because you are already a child of God. You don't need to prove anything.

The world has a way of telling you that you're nobody, that you need to prove that you're somebody by being more famous, or richer, or smarter, or more popular, or bigger or stronger than any one else. Don't let anybody tell you that. Don't let anybody tell you that you're nobody. Don't let anybody tell you that you have to prove yourself. You don't because you are loved and you are already somebody in the

eyes of the only One who matters. You have been engraved, branded, tattooed, as the prophet Isaiah says, upon the palm of God's hand.

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts,” says the LORD in Jeremiah, “and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

For Martin Luther there was nothing that mattered more in life than his baptism into Christ. He recounts that whenever the devil assailed him, whenever he was beaten down, whenever he felt lost in the abyss of life, he would answer, “But I am baptized! . . . And if I am baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body . . . . No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than Baptism,” he said, “for through it we obtain perfect holiness and salvation, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire.”

So, what do you do when you're baptized?

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.” Like I said, baptism can be a bummer of a birthmark.

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Some thirteen, fourteen and fifteen years ago, your parents and Godparents, together with a congregation somewhere in the church, were asked the question echoing Paul to the younger, perhaps somewhat fearful, Timothy, on your behalf, “Will you fight the good fight of the faith . . . ?” They answered, “Yes.” Without asking you whether or not you wanted the name of Christ, they placed you kicking and screaming on the path of following Jesus to the cross and resurrection. And throughout these years, they, along with your Mother the Church, through this congregation, your brothers and sisters, Grace Ateca, and Sheryl Hallmann, and Jane Lauritsen, and so many, many others have been fighting for the name of Christ in your life and his cross upon your heart. Even when there have been many, many

claims already vying for possession of your young lives, we have been here, and will go on being here, fighting for the name of Christ upon your lives.

“You are not your own,” says the Apostle Paul, “You were bought with a price. . . You’re body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.” And the symbol you choose to wear on that body says something about you. A tattoo or a brand or a ring or a pin or even a White Sox T-shirt is a mark of your identity. The same could be said of the kind of car you drive, or the neighborhood you live in, or the clothes you wear, or the organizations you’re involved in. When you “wear” those things, you’re saying, “This is who I am.” “This is what I believe in.” “This is where I place my loyalties.” An Olympian may sport a set of Olympic

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rings. Lovers exchange a piece of jewelry to wear on their bodies when “they are going steady,” as we used to say. The Latin Kings in Humboldt Park used to brand themselves, burning the flesh with a crown, claiming that the gang was their ultimate allegiance, staking their lives on it. But Christians bear the imprint of the cross, not just on a necklace or pin, but upon our hearts and lives, and flesh and blood. And, along with our Jewish cousins, we’ve ever been especially fond of any other mark upon our bodies but the image of God and, for Christians, the cross of Jesus Christ. You are made in the image—the likeness of God—let it shine in your lives.

Like I said, your body doesn’t belong to you, and we are not free to do with these bodies as we please. They belong to the Lord, purchased with his blood. “Therefore, glorify God in your body,” says Paul in First Corinthians.

Today, we ask you, “Will you fight the good fight of the faith . . . empowered by the Holy Spirit? Will you fight for your name? Will you fight for the name of Jesus? Will you say “yes” to God’s “yes” to you, spoken long ago at your baptism and every Sunday since then at the Lord’s Table?

Yes, we will “fight the good fight of the faith, taking hold of the eternal life, to which we were called and for which we made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” Take hold of the eternal life with which God has taken hold of you in Jesus, lest

anything else take hold of your tender young lives.

Many of us have answered “yes” to the questions you are about to be asked, and then, we have walked away from church, regarding our confirmation as nothing more than graduation from church. No, that’s not it. Confirmation is graduation *into* the church, *into* your baptism in Christ.

It is difficult, oftentimes painful, to be branded with the cross of Jesus Christ and left to wander the wild, wild West of the world in which we live. People see this brand as cause for ridicule, taunt, reviling, something to make fun of, maybe even to be ashamed of, maybe even a coward’s shame, as some would see the cross and those who follow it. “. . . But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. . . .”

In the years ahead, you will need to know that you walk with Jesus on this path with all the saints who have gone before us, especially when your peers will prey upon your every weakness. The promise in Jesus is that there is a power made perfect in weakness, a power which is revealed in the lives of the saints who surround us today cheering us on in the race of faith.

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of saints, let us also run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. . . .”

They are those who have shed their blood for Jesus’ sake, defending the gospel, renewing society,

tending the poor, caring for the church; loving their enemies, doing good to those who hated them, blessing those who cursed them, praying for those who abused them; doing to others as they would have done to them; living the kinds of lives that you, too, are willing to live and shall live always in Jesus our Lord.