**THE BODY OF CHRIST**

I’m the son of a dad who taught middle school math for nearly forty years and a mother who taught first grade and special education for a long time herself. Whatever else I am, I am a teacher’s kid. In elementary school, the final bell didn’t send me home to play like the other kids. I had to stay behind and wait for my mother to finish her lesson plans. Unlike my classmates, school also did not take me out from underneath the watchful eye of my parents for a good part of the day. If my parents weren’t correcting me in the halls or out on the playground, then the other teachers, their friends and colleagues, were; making sure my parents were made aware of any newsworthy information. Put plainly and simply, it’s not easy to be a teacher’s kid; particularly when you attend the district where your parents teach, as I did until I was fourteen.

It’s also not easy being a child of God. Start with how one becomes a child of God in the first place. It’s not easy. It requires divine intervention. It takes an act of God. By way of demonstration, in today’s reading from John, Philip gets a little too big for his britches. He boasts to Nathanael, “We, we, we have found Jesus; the very hope of Scripture!” How differently the prior verse tells the same story! There, it’s Jesus, God in the flesh, who finds Philip; not Philip who finds Jesus. And before the dust settles, it shall also be Jesus, God in the flesh, who finds Nathanael and brings him to belief. Nathanael was left skeptical and nonplused by Philip’s initial description of our Lord. But in the end, Jesus, God in the flesh, overcame this less than auspicious start and found Nathanael, just as Jesus had previously found Philip. This is how it always goes in John’s gospel.

As John tells it, no one can see the Kingdom of God without first being born from above, just as no one can enter the Kingdom God without first being born of water and the Holy Spirit. Becoming a member of God’s family, becoming a child of God, becoming a member of the Church through faith, is not a run of the mill transaction which we can transact ourselves. It requires divine intervention. It takes an act of God. And if becoming a child of God in the first place isn’t easy, might this have something to say about how it actually is to be a child of God?

It does. Being a child of God isn’t easy. From the moment we come to faith through the ministrations of the Holy Spirit, we’re set apart for special duty and are never again our own. St. Paul tries to get at this in today’s reading from 1st Corinthians when he points out that our freedom in Christ is not a blank check. To be sure, we are free in Christ. We’re free from sin, death, and the devil. We’re free of whatever previously stood in the way of our inheriting the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. But our real and genuine freedom in Christ has come at a price which we did not pay ourselves. Jesus Christ suffered, died, and rose again to set us free. The Holy Spirit dwells in us so we might have the faith which lays claim to the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice. We’re free, but not for anything. We’ve been freed to do it the Lord’s way. We’ve been freed to follow the Spirit’s lead. Like good and obedient children would, we’ve been freed to say to our Father in heaven, “Thy will be done.” And today, whether it’s Eli’s care for Samuel, what is to be the Corinthians’ responsibility for each, or Philip’s care for Nathanael, we’re told the very essence of God’s will for our lives is found in taking care of each other spiritually. What an awesome responsibility and monumental task. What an illustration of how it is not easy to be a child of God.

Just think of how it goes for Eli. As responsible for Samuel as we are for each other and those who aren’t here yet, it takes him three attempts before he’s able to lead his protégé in the right direction. Evidently, there will be a lot of trial and error in our care for one another before we get it right sometimes. Then in our reading from 1st Corinthians St. Paul’s stewardship of the congregation is threatened by one or more bad apples who are running around leading R-rated lives. Evidently, even when we do get our care for one another right, there will those who want to set things back. And let’s not forget that Philip’s initial approach with Nathanael left a lot to be desired. Evidently, encouraging faith, hope, and love on the part of others isn’t like waking up in the morning. It doesn’t just happen. It takes effort and forethought. But in spite of the challenges and the missteps involved, Samuel does eventually hear the Lord’s voice, Jesus and Nathanael do eventually connect, and Corinth does go on to a future that includes two letters bearing its name becoming holy writ. This suggests that though being a child of God isn’t easy, it is an effort supported by the grace of God; with the word of the Lord somehow, someway not returning empty. In the end, we don’t have to do it all, any more than we have to perfect. God’s forgiving grace can take the most meagre of efforts farther than we would ever imagine it would travel.

Trusting that the God will take care of what we can’t handle and borrowing a line from Philip, we’ve just got to say to the lapsed and the never before involved, “Come and see. Come and experience Jesus with me and with others. Come and check this church thing out.” And by the way, this really and truly works. Here at Mount Calvary, we know that 80% of those who do come and check things out return again. The trick is actually getting people to visit in the first place. And so, trusting that the word of the Lord shall not return empty, let’s say, “Come and see” an awful lot. To borrow an analogy born of my youth in America’s Dairyland, let’s place a premium on leading one another and those we don’t know yet out of the pasture and into the barn where God shall draw out the milk of faith, hope, and love. Again, being a child of God isn’t easy, but it is an effort supported by the grace of God. Most of the time we just have to get people to church and God will take it from there. But as effective as this generally is, it doesn’t always work. Sometimes, as evidenced by our reading from 1st Corinthians, people come to church, get involved, and keep carrying on as they did before. What then?

It’s here where being a child of God charged with care for the Church and the world God loves can get really tough. Not often, but still sometimes, our message will have to go beyond the words “come and see” so the words “cut it out” might also be put into circulation. Today, we remember that Samuel once had to deliver an uncomfortable message to Eli; a message precipitated by Eli’s failure to say to his sons, “Cut it out!” And in ancient Corinth, we’ve heard today, St. Paul once had to say, “Cut it out,” to those who were encouraging sin through their R-rated lives. To be sure, this shouldn’t happen without a clear word of God in support of it. But sometimes it will have to happen. The good news is there’s the grace of God here too.

You see, beyond the grace of God which brings to the finish line that which we have left imperfect and incomplete, there’s also the grace of God that empowers and enables us to speak the sometimes necessary words, “Cut it out.” Samuel once experienced this fortifying grace. So did St. Paul. Along with forgiving grace that carries imperfect beginnings to unexpected ends, may we also experience this fortifying grace of God here at Mount Calvary Lutheran as well. If it happens, and we can trust that it will, our story will become the story of Samuel as told by the final verse of our first reading today. Though the way won’t always be easy, with the fortifying and forgiving grace of God involved with our efforts to care for one another and those who aren’t here yet, we’ll be able to look back on things and say, “The Lord was with us and did not let our words fall to the ground;” in the process proving that Isaiah was spot on when he once was inspired to write that the word of the Lord shall not return empty. Amen!