

“Renewal of Baptism Vows Meditation”
Mark 1:4-11
January 8, 2006

The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

My friend Jim Lowry remembers how, each Saturday evening in his youth, just before he left the house to pick up his date, his father would look him squarely in the eye and say to him, “child, remember who you are.” Jim grew up in the heart of the South at a time when “who you were” still meant something. It didn’t have much to do with money, or education, or race – it had to do with character. What you did and how you behaved reflected on yourself, and it reflected on your family name. Jim had a responsibility to bear the Lowry name with honor.

“Child, remember who you are.” Now, the truth is, sometimes it’s hard to remember who we are ... sometimes quite literally.

Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Seminary, has been a friend of mine for many years through the Moveable Feast study group – the preaching group I meet with this week, a group that keeps all 20 of us going in our ministry. Cynthia is beloved by everyone in our group, so you can imagine how thrilled we all were when she announced her engagement to be married, and how much we all looked forward to her wedding this last summer. Wouldn’t you know it that the day she and Fred were married, I had a command performance to preach at Princeton Seminary. There was no way I could make it.

But many of our friends from the Moveable Feast did manage to come, including my identical twin sister, Karen, who pastors a church in Granville, Ohio. She came by herself while her husband Gene watched the kids. My husband John, however, had planned to attend the wedding, so of course Karen and John went together.

Now you need to know that, except for her shorter haircut, Karen and I are truly alike: same voice, same gestures, same loud laugh. Our children still get us mixed up. The wedding reception, apparently, was hysterical. Many of my

Chicago and Fourth Church friends were there, of course, and had never met Karen. And here this person who looked like me was, with my husband. She reports that she received many compliments on my behalf: everyone was especially thrilled at her new call to First Presbyterian Church at Lake Forest; she also insists that everybody loved my new short haircut (though I learned later from a few friends that they really like the way I wear it longer). Karen, of course, had no idea who any of these people were, but she got tired of correcting them, so she just did her best to fake it. The hardest thing was remembering who she really was!

It's fun having an identical twin, though we aren't exactly alike of course, inside or out. Even when we were little children, and were dressed alike, our friends told us apart by one tiny, nearly invisible identifying feature: the little mole under Karen's left eye. It was the only mark then that made us different; it was the only mark that let people tell us apart.

The truth is that all of us have identifying marks – marks that tell people who we are. Some of our identifying marks are natural: brown eyes, a high-pitched voice, a heavy gait. But many of our identifying marks are acquired, like a South-side of Chicago accent, or a hair color that stays remarkably blonde. One of my identifying marks is the wedding ring I wear, that reminds me of my marriage vows. Many people have recently worn flags as lapel pins as a sign that we value and belong to our country. Sometimes people's very skin is permanently marked: in terrible ways, against their will, like slaves who bore the name of their owner, or numbers branded on the arms of the Jews. And although I cannot fathom it, others choose to have their own skin marked: the gang members who wear their society's logo; the young person who chooses a tattoo as a personal statement. A few years ago, one of the members of our preaching group told us about the tattoo his son, Jeremy, had chosen. Jeremy is a singer, a member of an alternative rock band that plays in L.A. and the music he writes is highly political stuff. All their concert money is donated to various non-profit organizations; and they're really committed

to the poor. Jeremy's tattoo is of a microphone with a fist over it, and the words inscribed below it: "you will never silence the voice of the voiceless." He did it, he said, "Because I want to put something there so that I'll never forget what I'm feeling now, and what I've come to understand." We all have identifying marks, some inscribed, some worn; some passing, and some permanent. What is it that marks you? That tells the world who you are . . . that helps you remember your deepest identity?

Maybe we don't think about it this way, but baptism is a sign, or mark, as well – the most important mark I believe we'll ever wear. Baptism is the mark of the covenant between us and God: child of the covenant, we say when we baptize: child of the covenant, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.

What does it mean to be marked by Christ? Like a wedding band, it means that we have exchanged vows, exchanged vows with God. Like a lapel pin or a class ring, it conveys the values that we hold and the group to whom we belong: the family of Christ. And like Jeremy's tattoo, it reminds us every day what we believe in: that we are chosen by Christ, that we are no longer our own, that Jesus died for our sins and rose again, and we have new life in him.

What's so different about baptism, of course, is that its mark leaves an *invisible* sign: It doesn't tell the world who we are, and what we believe, and to whom we belong. Instead, it tells *other* forces who we are:

It tells *death* that we have been claimed by Christ, and that it cannot have the last word.

And it tells *evil* that we belong to God, and can withstand temptation.

And it tells *us* who we are, and what we believe, and to whom we belong: Child of the covenant, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ's own forever. You are not alone; you are no longer on your own; and no power of

temptation or evil or even death itself can take away the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

For it is not an accident that it is the sign of the cross that we make on each forehead: The cross of Jesus Christ. For long before our foreheads were marked with the cross, Jesus' body was marked for us, marked with nails in his hands and feet, and thorns upon his head. And he suffered for us, to take away our sins, and died for us, to overwhelm the power of death, and he rose for us, so that we will rise with him again. And nothing in heaven or on earth can separate us from life in him.

Martin Luther, every morning when he got out of bed, remembered the sign of the cross that had marked his forehead so many years ago when he was an infant. And though he could not see it, this invisible mark of baptism gave him the courage every day, to face the terrible power of evil around and within the church; and the mark of baptism gave him the inspiration to see God's grace in a different way; and the mark of baptism reminded him that he was not in this alone, that Christ Jesus lived in him, and no power could ever overcome him.

Dear friends, we all have identifying marks – so many marks that declare our vows, and proclaim our allegiances, and help us remember what we want never to forget. But there is one mark that matters more than any other: child of the covenant, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit, and you are marked as Christ's own forever. Child, remember who you are, of God.