

It Takes a Village to Baptize a Baby?
The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
The Festival of Pentecost: May 31, 2009
The Rite of Confirmation for Lauren Mathie

I'd like to begin my sermon today by asking that age-old question, "How many *whatevers* does it take to change a light bulb?" For instance, how many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? *One, but the light bulb has to want to change.* How about this one? How many bureaucrats does it take to change a light bulb? *Two, one to screw it in, and one to screw it up.* How many Floridians does it take to change a light bulb? *Don't know. They're still counting.* How many Roman Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? *Nun: N-U-N.* How many spirit-filled Pentecostal evangelicals at worship does it take to change a light bulb? *One, because their hands are already in the air.* How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb? *Don't bother yourself. That's okay, dear. Don't worry about me. I'll just sit here in the dark.* Here's a good one. How many lawyers does it take to change a light bulb? *How many can you afford?* Here's one about changing a light bulb that seems to apply to just about any church. *Which light bulb? Who put that bulb in? Where's the ladder? Which ladder? Who used it last? Who's in charge of ladders around here?* How many Calvinists does it take to change a light bulb? Have you ever heard of predestination? *God has predetermined the course of light in the midst of darkness.* Yes, I know. That was kind of deep. Here's one that may be a little more obvious. How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb? *Did someone say "CHANGE"?*

I ask these questions because of what we are celebrating today, the Rite of Confirmation for Lauren Elizabeth Mathie. How many Lutherans does it take to baptize a baby? It takes an entire congregation well over thirteen years to open the eyes of the babies we baptize to the love of God that surrounds them, embraces them, empowers them, calls them, guides them, and invites them on a journey that promises to lead to the fullness of joy, giving them purpose in life, by joining in the work of the church and supporting the cause of God's kingdom. There's the Nursery next door for the littlest ones, Sunday School for kids of all ages, Confirmation Instruction for grades 7, 8, and sometimes 9, followed up with all sorts of activities for High School youth. We invest a lot of resources and create a wide array of programs to guide, encourage, and prepare our children for the journey that awaits them when they chose to affirm for themselves the faith into which they were baptized as babies.

As Lutherans, we baptize babies to make a theological point. It's not about what we know, but what God has done in Jesus Christ. It's not about our decision to choose God, but God's decision to love us. God isn't sitting up in heaven waiting for us to

invite Him into our lives. God has been here with His love long before we were ever aware of the love with which He loves us. We baptize babies to make the theological point that we are saved by grace, by God's grace, and not because we deserve it based on the quality or the quantity of our works. Babies bring nothing to the Baptismal Font, except their need for God's love and ours. That's what God gives, and that is what we bring with our commitment to do whatever we can to offer a witness to the presence of God's love alive among us. For years now we have made the transition as a church from thinking about Confirmation as graduation from Sunday School to thinking about Confirmation as an affirmation: the affirmation of Baptism, the affirmation of faith, the affirmation that Confirmation is a community's commitment to lifting up faith as a life-long process of growth in grace. Our fourteenth year is not a stopping point, but another step in a journey where our understanding of faith must grow with our experience of life.

We are so blessed at Zion to have such good people directing our efforts in Christian Education. Debbie Fox has given an extraordinary effort over the last several years. Her contribution to our devotional guide offering reasons for why we love our church made it so very clear that she loves watching faith grow in the hearts, the minds, and the lives of our children. Listen as she talks about Nathan and Jeremy. *"I want my children to have a strong faith in God, and to understand God's amazing love and power. I want them to understand the importance of going to church and Sunday School. I want them to see how important prayer is. I know that this happens with our church.... I've seen it happen with our boys.... The truth is that it has always been a fear of mine that our boys wouldn't understand the importance of God and the church.... But I am confident that the time they spend at church makes a difference.... There are so many awesome opportunities at our church, not only for adults, but also for our children. We've got a terrific church family that always steps up in an amazing fashion to support people in need, inside and outside of the congregational family. We've got great service events, a great Sunday School, and VBS, too.... There is so much more here at Zion. It's the place that I always wanted for my children, a place where they can grow into their role as children of God."* [2009 Lenten Devotional Guide, *Growing in Faith with Family and Friends: Why We Love the Church*, Daily Meditation for Saturday, April 4]

Clearly, Debbie loves being a part of this process, and it shows in how she serves and the effect that has on our children. Renee Schrader also distinguished herself with an exceptional reflection in our devotional guide. [See the Daily Meditation for Monday, March 23] I'm sure Renee would remind us that we've mentioned that way too many times. She has also distinguished herself as an exceptional Catechist, Confirmation Instructor, a teacher of the faith, who shares it with down-to-earth insight and lots of real-life joy. Renee knows what it means to have a family at home and a family here at church that supports our youth in learning what's right, and aspiring to become a person who makes our lives and our world better. She has

been happy to join in our effort to make that happen for new generations of young people becoming maturing Christians, where God's will makes a difference in the lives that we lead, and the lives we lead make a difference in the world God loves. Edna Fischer saw that happen with her daughter Jayne. Jayne has seen this happen with her daughter Renee. How many more generations will share in the joy of this mystery of what it means to grow in faith? Lauren Mathie is not Renee's daughter; but she does represent the next generation in which the seed of faith planted with prayer at Baptism can be seen coming to flower and budding to full bloom in the good soil of our congregational family, ready to sprout wings and bear fruit in a life of continuing to grow in love and service by grace.

So, how many Lutherans does it take to baptize a baby? It takes the whole church, all the community we can muster to teach the language of faith as a living language, a language that comes alive in forming a community that shares a vision of what God desires, and then lives the love God gives to make that vision compelling, making what is conceivable in God's mind into something real in our lives, turning what God's grace makes possible into something that is actual among us. That's the role of the Holy Spirit, inspiring us with the mind of Christ, and empowering us with the love of God.

There are many traditions that place the focus of faith on the believer's decision to accept Christ and follow Jesus, and our decisions are important; but they are not decisive. God's decision to love us precedes our decision about Him. God's gracious initiative in Christ precedes our response to follow Jesus. God's love surrounded us long before we knew who we were, who God is, what love means, and how to share it. This community of faith, this language of love, this vision for life and purpose for living: all of these gifts were constants that preceded our decisions. They made the person we have become possible. They are all a part of the promise of Baptism and the Rite of Confirmation as life-long growth in our knowledge of God's love alive among us.

In the vision of the prophet Ezekiel described in chapter 37, those dry, dead bones will live because it is God's desire that the gift of life overcome all evidence of death. It is God's will that God's Word be both the first word in the act of creation and the last word in the promise of new creation. We see this prophetic vision come to life in the second chapter of the Book of Acts, where, instead of brooding over the waters of creation, God's Spirit is seen dancing over the crowd in Jerusalem, with tongues of fire resting on each one, giving to all access to understanding the language of God's love through the community that comes alive in Christ. That's the Good News we celebrate today: God's promise in Baptism, Christ's love alive among us, and the Spirit's power resting upon us and reaching within us ... as we affirm our faith and promise to live ... in Jesus' name. Amen

THE RITE OF CONFIRMATION FOR LAUREN MATHIE

Renee Schrader, Catechist: Lauren Mathie has been instructed in the Christian faith and desires to make public affirmation of her Baptism.

P: You have heard the holy and saving gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now receive the sign of that gospel on your body and in your heart, that you may know the Lord and the power of his resurrection. Receive the sign of the cross on your forehead, a sign of God's endless love and mercy for you. Learn to know and to follow Christ.

C: Glory and praise to you, almighty and gracious God.

P: Receive the sign of the cross on your ears, that you may hear the gospel of Christ, the word of life.

C: Glory and praise to you, almighty and gracious God.

P: Receive the sign of the cross on your eyes, that you may see the light of Christ, illumination for your way.

C: Glory and praise to you, almighty and gracious God.

P: Receive the sign of the cross on your lips, that you may sing the praise of Christ, the joy of the church.

C: Glory and praise to you, almighty and gracious God.

P: Receive the sign of the cross on your heart, that God may dwell there by faith.

C: Glory and praise to you, almighty and gracious God.

P: Receive the sign of the cross on your shoulders, that you may bear the gentle yoke of Christ.

C: Glory and praise to you, almighty and gracious God.

P: Receive the sign of the cross on your hands, that God's mercy may be known in your work.

C: Glory and praise to you, almighty and gracious God.

P: Receive the sign of the cross on your feet, that you may walk in the way of Christ.

C: Glory and praise to you, almighty and gracious God.

P: Lauren, you have made public profession of your faith. Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism: to live among God's faithful people, to hear his Word and share in his supper, to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

Confirmand: I do, and I ask God to help and guide me.

P: Gracious Lord, through water and the Spirit you have made Lauren your own. You have forgiven her sins and brought her to the newness of life. Continue to strengthen her with the Holy Spirit, and daily increase in her your gifts of grace: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence; this we pray through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.

C: Amen

P: Father in heaven, for Jesus' sake, stir up in Lauren the gift of your Holy Spirit and its power; confirm her faith, guide her life, empower her in her serving, give her patience in suffering, and bring her to everlasting life.

C: Amen