

## Celebrating Vacation Bible School

The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor  
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church  
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This past week we went crazy with *STUDIO GO GAME SHOW*. I was the host of *STUDIO GO GAME SHOW*, Wade Winalot, and my role was to encourage the troops with my daily invitation to join in the fun of Studio Go—Go—Go—Go—Go Game Show. Go Lead, Go Risk, Go Tell, Go Obey, and Go Serve: with lots of repetition, pumping of fists, and smooth talking chatter from your winsome host, Wade Winalot. The truth is that Zion's Vacation Bible School is quite a ministry for our community, and Debbie Fox did a great job getting us ready to go—go—go—go—go for a really rewarding week. The *News Page* just touches the surface when we begin to thank all the folks who are involved as volunteers in this remarkable program. In addition to our volunteers, which are many, the heart and soul of this ministry are the hearts and souls of the many children who join us for the week-long extravaganza we call Vacation Bible School. The kids absolutely loved their experience of *STUDIO GO GAME SHOW*. The music, the food, the lessons, the crafts, our morning offerings, daily service projects, T-Shirt Day, Water Day, the Ice Cream Social, and Family Night.... What great fun! What great ministry!

Wade Winalot's role was to host a game show, a great concept with many themes and formats to choose from: *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*, *Deal or No Deal*, *The Price Is Right*, *Wheel of Fortune*. My favorite moment was Thursday evening during the program on Family Night. I was passing out my Wade Winalot dollars – big money for big prizes, and you will find yours on the back of this sermon. I asked Savannah Heller to convince the studio audience that she wanted to be a contestant on *Let's Make A Deal*, and her excitement in jumping up and running forward was stunning, truly believable. She had her *Wade Winalot dollars* in hand, and was willing to trade, to make a deal, for what was behind the curtain and inside the box. Inside the box was Zion's historic brass Cross. Behind the curtain – actually, under the curtain – was Zion's marble Baptismal Font. Savannah didn't need much encouragement, but I told her that if she were willing to part with her *Wade Winalot dollars*, she would see God – not in the sense that she would win “God-in-a-bottle” to take home, or that she would receive a picture of God to hang on her wall or put in her wallet, but in the sense that the very presence and power of God's love, God's grace, and God's faithfulness would be on display right there in front of her.

She chose what was inside the box, which, as I said, was our brass Cross. I looked at the Cross and recited what Paul says in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians when talking about the Cross as the signature event embodying what God did for us in Jesus Christ. “We preach Christ crucified, pure folly to high-minded Greeks, absolute scandal to ordinary Jews, but to those who are called, to who believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, our Savior, the Cross is what God's wisdom looks like and what God's love does. It is the power of God's love and the wisdom of God's ways.” (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:23-24). I would say that

there is no greater testimony to the power of God's love than what Paul says in summing up his tribute to this love in Romans 8:37-39. "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor principalities, nor powers, no height, depth, or distance, nothing we've done or ever could do, nothing in this life, nor anything in the next, nothing in the entirety of all of creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God, which is ours, freely given and fully extended through the life-giving embrace of Christ Jesus our Lord." The Cross says it all and does it all when it comes to talking about God's love in action.

From the Cross we turned our focus to the Baptismal Font as the place where God's love becomes real for us. A verse from 1<sup>st</sup> John was the first to come to mind. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." And so we are, not so we ought to be, or so we should be, or so we could be, but so we are. Martin Luther is recorded as having said many things – some very memorable, and other stuff that was forgettable and regrettable, but all recorded. In this instance, his personal testimony speaks volumes about how important baptism was for keeping him grounded in God's love. He scoured his mind, which was filled with doubts. He examined his life, where the evidence of his faithfulness was unconvincing. He would think about God's righteous law, and feel the heat of God's judgment. It was only God's grace and the promise of God's Word written on his Baptismal Certificate that provided the tangible proof he needed to overcome the burden of his sin with the truth of his salvation.

There it was right on his Baptismal Certificate in black-and-white: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God: and so we are." (1<sup>st</sup> John 3:1) There it is in black-and-white: the truth of God's Word, the power of God's love, the presence of God's faithfulness, the promise of our salvation. I also thought of another Scripture, the verse with which Matthew ends his Gospel and begins our mission: "Go ye into all the world, baptizing all peoples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching all that I have commanded. And lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age and beyond." (Matthew 28:19-20) Again, there it is for all to see: God with us forever – that's the promise and gift of Baptism. In just a moment we're going to celebrate the Baptism of Josh Keith – a lifelong friend to the Schraders, and long-time participant in the life of our church. Josh helped with Vacation Bible School this week, and I saw his Baptism as the perfect extension of the Good News we celebrated all week long with STUDIO GO GAME SHOW. We talked about the basics of faith with our kids all week long. I don't know how many times I said it as our host: "Remember, kids, God is with you wherever you go." The point of this reminder was to let God's presence encourage us and God's promise empower us to Go lead, Go risk, Go tell, Go obey, and Go serve because nothing can separate us from the love God gives, and asks us to live, as witnesses to the Good News that Jesus is alive, of which we are the living, loving proof.

The truth of the matter is that between the Good News of God's love and our week-long celebration of Vacation Bible School, we get a really good look at what the promises made with Baptism look like. We saw kids from all over the area, youth helpers galore,

members bringing friends, entire families and their extended families involved. Then there's Debbie Fox, Director of Christian Education at Zion, coaxing, asking, inviting, mustering up and motivating volunteers, partly through friendliness, mostly through desire, love, and commitment, pulling the various pieces together like a woman possessed with a vision for what it takes to run this program and what this ministry can be. You can see her working on sets, recruiting teachers, finding folks for the kitchen, and hands-on volunteers organizing the crafts, the classrooms, the games, the music, the crazy competition around the offerings, the service projects, our quilt squares and Comfort Givers, Family Night, the Ice Cream Social, the Quilt Raffle, Water Day, Tie-dyed T-shirts. It's true that everybody has their own favorite, but the end result is stars hanging from the ceiling, feet glued to the walls, quilts sewn, meals served, love shared, lessons taught, music like you wouldn't believe, memories galore, growth in grace, God's grace everywhere. That's the promise of Baptism – promises that give rise to commitments-in-action, and the promise that celebrates potential becoming actual, hopes being realized at the intersection of faith in God and love for one another.

Before bringing this sermon to a close, I would like to reflect further on the hard work of Debbie Fox for just a moment. During the course of this wild-and-crazy week we call Vacation Bible School, it is often the case that a hurried and sometimes harried Debbie Fox can be seen overseeing the sprawling activities that make up one or another of the many stations that form the core of this ministry-in-progress. If you can catch her for a moment, you will see her mind racing, with hints of exhaustion, miles of interest, lots of concern, and a general sense of mastery over whatever matters. I know that when it comes to miracles, we like ours done cleanly, with instantaneous results, and a magic wand announcing God's glorious design. But when I think of miracles, I think of the look of love that fills Debbie's face with an overload of dedication and hard work, all so very evident during the week of Vacation Bible School. Vacation Bible School is an amazing week at Zion, exhausting, to be sure, but amazing for the love that's shown, the work that's done, and the grace that overflows into the joy of our generosity and gratitude.

It's easy to understand why a person who is involved in this kind of week would say, "Hey, I want to be a part of that!" That's what we're saying with Joshua Keith's Baptism. While it is true that Josh had already decided that he wanted to be a part of this thing we have at Zion prior to Vacation Bible School, it was pretty much for the same reason, namely, the love he saw lived in the lives of ordinary people and friends like the Schrader family. Ultimately, that's what it takes. That's what it's always taken to tell the Good News that Jesus is alive – ordinary people living extraordinary lives focused on sharing the love of God, making God's love real through the friendships we form, the programs we offer, the help that we give, the worship we raise with the songs that we sing, the faith that is in us, the love we lift up, and the lives that we live, all as our witness to the miracle that happens when we pray and work, *ora et labora*, pray and work, and then work some more ... to tell the story of God's glory, alive among us ... in Jesus' name. Amen