

“What’s In Your Wallet?”

Dear Friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

I imagine most, if not, all of us have seen the commercials from Capital One, designed to make their credit card the one you carry (and use) most often. Their take-away line (at the end of each commercial) is straightforward. They ask the question, “What’s in your wallet?” They want you to think about what you have at your disposal and why (what they have to offer) would make your life so much better.

I have to admit it’s a creative way to come at it, to advertise what they’re trying to sell by framing it in a question. It’s also, apart from the advertising pitch (itself), a good philosophical question.

“What IS in your wallet?” What is it you carry (with you) each day that identifies who you are? Everywhere you go? Everything you do? What you count on and depend upon and need? “What IS in your wallet?” It’s a good question.

I remember receiving my first wallet as a kid. It made me feel so grown up. There wasn’t much in it. My student body card. A few bucks. Several wallet-size school photos of my friends. Later on, my driving permit and, eventually, my license. All-in-all, it was a pretty flat fold. But it gave a good picture of who I was (at the time), what was important to me, and where my life was heading.

Today, I look at my wallet and it’s a bit fatter. It’s not because there’s more money in it, but because there’s more I need to carry. In fact, I’ll hold it up here (for a moment) because it’s becoming a thing of the past. Our kids have them, our grandkids might. Not so sure after that. For almost everything in here, there’s an app. (It’s all changing.) If you want to make some money, hang on to your wallets. Not too much longer and they’ll be collector’s items.

A lot’s changed in my wallet since I was a kid, but it still gives a picture of who I am, what’s important, and where my life is heading. I still have a driver’s license. Still have a few bucks. I have a Starbucks card, an Ace Rewards card, a debit card. There’s Bank of America, Home Depot, Costco. I belong to Kaiser, I’m a Thrivent Financial member (in good standing). I still have credit, and there’s even a card identifying me as a preacher, although it’s almost out of date. (Don’t even go there.) I know you want to, but let’s not even go there. And it’s all in my wallet. It all gives a picture of who I am.

But is that who I am, what I have in my wallet? Is that you are, what you carry with you each day? It might not be in your wallet. It might be on your smart phone. (Those phones are getting pretty smart.) But is that who you are? Does that define and direct your life?

Let’s turn to our story. The story we read today is one that (at least in part) has been part of our readings three times in the past two months. The first was on the second Sunday in January. It was the occasion of remembering and celebrating Jesus’ baptism.

The sermon that day was titled, “Full Immersion.” We talked about how our relationship with Christ isn’t just a sprinkle or a splash. It’s not enough to go after it part way. It’s a full immersion. You’re either following Jesus (in your life) or you’re not. You’re either giving him (control of your life), or you’re giving it to someone or something else. There’s no middle ground in being a follower.

The second time we read it was (two weeks later) on the occasion of our Annual Meeting. The direction that day was on the calling of the disciples and the vision God has given us here at St. Timothy’s. The sermon was titled, “Re-Casting Our Vision.” It was a challenge to us to continually re-cast our lives (as well as our shared life) in light of where God is leading.

Today, it’s portions of the same story, the third time we’re reading parts of this text. The difference this time is that it covers a much broader scope, giving us a much more complete and accurate picture of the Christian life.

The story begins today with Jesus’ baptism. In the Jordan River, by a man named John. You know the story. A voice comes from the heavens saying, “You are My Son; with you I am well pleased.”

In the story, Marks starts out by telling us about Jesus’ baptism; not as a way of washing away his sins, because he didn’t have any; and not as a way of becoming one of God’s children, because he already was. But

as a way of establishing his identity; as a way of identifying him as the Son of God. And it was from that identity as (God's Son) that Jesus' entire life and ministry would unfold.

There are a lot of misconceptions (out in the world) about the Christian life, what it is and what it's not. Some think that being a Christian is nothing more than a matter of how you live. Live a good life. Do the best you can. Be kind. Serve others. Look for ways to help. That's what it means to be a Christian.

Some think it has to do with going to church. If you're a Christian, you go to church. If you're a believer, you hang out with other believers. You read the Bible. You pray. You get involved in Christian things. As a Christian, it's who you are. It's what you do.

Now, we're talking about who we are, about what defines us in life. Ask the basic identity question, who you are, and (most people) will answer with what they do, or with how they fit in. "I'm a teacher. I'm a doctor. I'm in high tech. I'm a mother. I'm a father. I'm retired. I go to a certain school." That's how they define their identity. That's how they think about their life.

Now, there's nothing wrong with that. It's one way to come at it. But it's not the defining way for the Christian. It's not what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The Christian life is not defined by what you do. The Christian life is defined by who you are and by whose you are.

It's ironic (these days) that the more we pin down and define who we are by what we do (the things we carry), the more at risk we are for having our identity stolen. In this electronic, everything on-line age, most of us are only a "click away" from having it happen. It's the new 11th commandment: "Don't click." One misplaced click and it's all gone.

For the Christian, it can still happen. They can still hack in and take everything you have. We're as vulnerable as the rest. But no one can steal your identity. No one (and no thing) can take away who you are.

Your life is not defined by what you do or even by what you carry. Your life is defined by Jesus and his cross and your value and worth in the sight of God.

How many people go through life without discovering who they are? How many people live out their life without realizing why they're here? Don't make that mistake. Don't fall into that endless and (life-ending) trap. There's more to life than what you do in life. There's more to life than what you carry.

"What's in your wallet?" What is it that defines who you are? It's interesting in today's story that immediately following Jesus' baptism, the first thing that happens is that Jesus is led into the wilderness to do battle with Satan. Not long after he's come up for air (in his baptism), he's led into a setting where the devil is trying to get him to do just that, to err, to do something (in some way) against his Father's will.

I remember how (for years), each time I'd read this story in Mark's gospel (it's so short), how I'd come to the conclusion that Mark was simply telling us (in as concise a manner as possible) what happened in Jesus' life. It's a short gospel. Sixteen chapters to cover the three and half years of Jesus' ministry; there isn't much room for anything else.

What I realized (and what I had missed) was the reason Mark tells it like he does. This isn't simply a summary of Jesus' life. It's a summary of the Christian life. It's not just how it worked for our Lord. It's how it works for us.

Guess who becomes your enemy the moment you are baptized? It's not Jesus. It's the devil. Guess what he tries to make happen the moment you decide to become a follower? He tries to pull you away. He does everything he can to get you to trip up. And if not to trip up, then to doubt and to question and to begin to wonder if what God promised (in your baptism) is real.

You know the questions. Am I really a child of God? Does God really love me as he says he does? Does he know what I'm facing? Does he know what I'm up against? And if he knows, does he care? Does it matter? Does it make any difference if I trust?

Now, I mentioned at the beginning that this is the third time in less than two months when we've been reading a portion of this same text. The first was a remembering of Jesus' baptism. The second was the day of our annual meeting. The third, (again here today) is on the first Sunday in the season of Lent.

Lent, as you know, is a season that lasts for 40 days. Those 40 days are to reflect the "40 days" Jesus spent in the wilderness as a newly baptized and blessed child of God.

Now, clearly, our understanding of "blessing" needs to change when we realize that the first post-baptismal story is one of Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for 40 days he was with the

wild animals and was tempted by the devil. Our understanding needs to change. What cannot change and what will never change is the promise we have when it happens.

I remember reading (years ago) an article on the Golden Gate Bridge and how, when it was being designed, how the engineers had to take into consideration three different kinds of loads or stresses. #1 was the dead load. #2 was the live load. #3 was the wind load. The dead load was the weight of the bridge itself. The live load was the weight of the daily traffic the bridge would need to carry. The wind load was the pressure of the storms that would (from time to time) beat on the bridge.

Now, I don't know about you, but I think that's a pretty good description of life. There's the dead load that comes to all of us as a result of living in a fallen world. There's the live load that comes from the daily challenges we face. And there's the wind load that results from those storms that too often end up hammering away on what we're doing.

The message today is that we're not alone. Tempted by the devil? Out in the wilderness with the wild beasts? Carrying a load that seems, too often, too great to handle?

You're not alone. You don't have to carry the weight yourself. No matter where you go, Jesus is with you. No matter what you do, his Spirit is there to give you guidance and strength. And not only that, but you belong to him. You're his child. He's your Father. And that's an identity (in your life) that will never change.

"What's in your wallet?" How is it you think about and define your life? I brought something with me that I'd like to share. In fact, I brought two things to share. The first is a copy of a baptismal certificate we give to people on the day they are baptized. We have a baptism this morning at the 9:45 service. The person being baptized received a certificate just like this.

Do you know what it says? It says (it has a place for the date) "on the 22nd day of February, 2015, (and then there's a place for the name), "this person" child of "these parents", born on "such-and-such" a date, in San Jose, CA, was baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (And then it says), "St. Timothy's Lutheran Church of San Jose, CA welcomes this new member of God's family." (And then there's a place for the pastor to sign the document.) It's pretty simple. That's the first thing I brought; a copy of a baptismal certificate.

The second is something I received when I was called to serve here at St. Timothy's. It's a copy of my "Letter of Call" indicating that this congregation has called me to serve as one of its pastors. Pastor Judy (and Jim) have the same thing.

Do you know what it says? It says "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...Rev. Daniel Selbo, with prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to do God's will, St. Timothy's Lutheran Church, San Jose, CA...meeting on October 30, 1994 extends to you this call to serve as Senior Pastor."

It goes on to describe the duties of the call, as well as the promised support in return. And then there's a place for the signatures of the Congregational President and Secretary, a place for those signatures (and for the call itself) to be attested by the local bishop...and finally a place for the date in which those documents were signed.

Do you know the difference between these two? Do you know what makes the one different from the other? (There isn't much.) The only difference is one of function. The only difference is what (each of us) specifically are called to do.

My call (and Pastor Judy's) is to preach and to teach and to administer the sacraments. We're called to take a lead and to give direction and to make sure the things that need to happen (here at the church) continue to happen. That's our call. That's the function we're called to serve.

But do you know what our calling is as people? Do you know what God's calling and claim on our lives is all about? It's the same calling and claim he laid upon you when you were baptized. It's the same calling and claim he gave to you when Jesus died on the cross for your sins.

His claim is that we are his children. His claim is that we belong to him. And his calling (to all of us) is to follow. His calling (to each of us) is that we become disciples.

Here's the bottom line. Leadership is a function. It's a responsibility the church has given to a few. Discipleship is a calling. It's a responsibility and a privilege given to all.

Don't ever think that your calling is anything less than ours. Don't ever think that your value in God's sight is anything less than anyone else. The responsibility and the privilege we all have are the ones given to us in Jesus. The calling and claim we all share are the ones paid for and promised in Christ.

Let me close today with this. We're talking about the things we carry, about what defines and identifies us in life. How about this? I'm not going to check. I'll never even ask. But how about this as an idea?

Go home today and find a copy of your baptismal certificate. If you still have it, if you can find it, why not take it and reduce it to card size and then laminate it like an ID? Or maybe just make a copy of it and fold it and slip it into your wallet. Carry it with you everywhere you go. (Do it for these next 40 days during Lent.)

If nothing else, it'll serve as a reminder of who you are; a reminder of whose you are. And not only that, it will be, (without question), the most genuine and theft-proof identity you'll have. "What's In Your Wallet?" Amen.