

“THE MARK OF CHRIST”

a sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Tom Collins
Santee (SC) Presbyterian Church
June 24, 2012

This sermon came to me as I picked up a book on the end table of our living room, a book my wife had taken out of the “vast holdings” of the Bradford Village library. I read only a few pages, all at the beginning. It’s a book written by Tim Russert, a political commentator who at the time of his untimely death at age 58 was host of *Meet the Press* which, I believe, is the longest running show in the history of American television. Tim’s second book, the one I found in the living room, is called *Wisdom of Our Father* and was written in response to his first book, entitled *Big Russ and Me*, the story of his father, a blue collar worker who lived for his family but never had much enjoyment of his own and never truly benefitted from his labors.

Tim records a moving incident which occurred on Christmas Eve after the family had attended midnight Mass and returned to their Buffalo apartment. Their son Luke decided to take a shower. A few minutes later Tim heard his wife Maureen screaming, “My God, what have you done?” She ran to Tim and shouted, “He has a tattoo!”

Tim jumped out of his chair and yelled, “Luke, come in here!” A few months earlier Tim had learned of Luke’s yearning to get a tattoo, but Tim had convinced himself, after explaining the health issues and the stupid things youth do and later regret, that Luke had been dissuaded.

Not so! There was Luke, towel around his waist and his arms firmly locked. Tim said, “Let me see it,” “No,” Luke quickly replied. Tim repeated his demand. Still Luke refused. Tim finally commanded Luke, “Let me see it.” Luke reluctantly raised his arm, revealing at the top of his rib cage, the letters TJR, not only Tim’s initials but also Tim’s father’s initials. Luke said, “After I read your book, I wanted you and grandpa to always be on my side.” Tim writes, “I collapsed back into my chair --- speechless --- and then sobbed. Luke came over and wrapped his arms around me. I pledged never to complain about Luke’s tattoo again. I was honored to be on his side --- forever.”

I started to ponder that story, possibly in some egocentric ways. I don't have a tattoo and never have, and you can take my word for it, I never will. But I do carry a mark on my forehead, one which was placed there by water. It is the mark of the Cross. It reminds me, not so much of who I am, but whose I am. The mark of the Cross was placed on my forehead when I was baptized.

This I find strange, but whenever a mark is mentioned in the Bible, it is almost always a curse rather than a blessing. The mark of Cain is the most infamous. Do you realize that it takes only four chapters of the Bible for a murder to occur, in this case a brother killing a brother, what we call fratricide.

Both brothers are farmers. Cain grows plants while Abel tends sheep. Both bring an offering to God. Abel's is accepted which means Abel *himself* is accepted, but God rejects both Cain and his offering.

Nothing in this text explains why God accepted one and rejected the other. Everything I've ever read about the reasons for rejection is unfounded speculation. We are never told the reason, and that might be a lesson in itself because God is not always reasonable. Through jealousy Cain kills Abel, and when questioned by God about what he has done, Cain audaciously questions God by asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Do you realize that that is the first human question asked in the Bible? And if you're wondering, and you shouldn't be, the answer to Cain's question is a resounding "yes." We are all keepers of our brothers and sisters. That is how we show others that we are marked by Christ. We are called to care for each other. That's a major part of what it means to be human.

So Cain is cursed and receives a mark which prevents others from killing him. Again, you may speculate all you want about what the mark was, but

we are never told in the biblical record. All we know is that the mark is visible.

Our mark is invisible. It's the Cross, whether you were baptized as an infant or as an adult, you have been branded by Christ, and because that mark is invisible, there is only one way others will see it. They will see it in the way you treat them, in the way you act, or in the way you react. Are you imbued with love, peace, hope, joy and gratitude, all signs of the Cross? Or are you hateful, contentious, despairing, joyless, and ungrateful? *You* know that the Cross of Christ is on your forehead, placed there at baptism, but what matters is whether the world sees the Cross. It's invisible but your actions can make it visible.

I John 3 says, "For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We must not be like Cain who was the evil one and murdered his brother. Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

William Willimon was for many years the chaplain at Duke University. In most university chapels on a Sunday morning you could shoot birdshot from the pulpit and not hit anyone. They are virtually empty. But when Willimon was at Duke the chapel was crowded. He is now finishing up an eight-year term as the Methodist bishop of the Northern Alabama Conference, and the word on the street is that he will return to Duke to teach. He has written over 50 books. One of my favorites is one of his earliest. It's entitled *Remember Who You Are*. Willimon got the title from his mother. When he became a teenager and started branching out, just before he would leave the house on a Saturday evening, his mother would say simply, "Remember who you are!" Willimon never asked his mother what she meant because he knew what she was saying. He wore a mark on his forehead. He was owned by Someone. He wasn't his own person. He carried the Cross on his forehead. He was to remember that. He had to honor Christ.

Think about all the times in your lives when that Cross remained invisible.

+the time you lost your cool when a clerk took too long to check you out

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- +when you refused to forgive someone, possibly over a very petty hurt
- +when you spent too much on yourself and your family and had nothing left to feed the hungry or help the poor
- +when you refused to apologize to your husband or wife, knowing in your heart of hearts that you were wrong
- +when you simply didn't get your way and pouted for days
- +when you sinfully convinced yourself that the Church was created in your image and not in the image of Christ
- +when you lament what you don't have and can't celebrate what you do have

Go home and draw up your own list. It shouldn't take you long if you're honest with yourself and with God. How easy it is for us to forget

- +that we are marked by Christ in the waters of baptism
- +that we are called to make an invisible Cross visible in our world
- +that we were intended to carry Christ.

The Roman Catholic Church has an order of priest known as Christophers. You'll see them on television every so often. They are so named because "Christopher" literally means "a bearer of Christ." Christophers carry Christ, but you don't have to be a member of a Roman Catholic order to carry Christ, to visibly show that you have on you the mark of Christ given at baptism.

And this leads me to one of my favorite words: honor. Honor is who you are when no one is looking, and of course Someone is always looking. Honor is knowing that you never do anything alone. We always carry people with us --- our families, the schools we attended, our country, our churches, but most of all, our God. We honor God by showing others how God has molded us. We bring honor to God when we make that invisible mark of the Cross on our forehead, given to us at baptism, visible. We honor God when we carry God with us.

Forty years ago my home church sent me off to a seminary only 37 miles from the church. I was the first candidate for the ministry in what was then a church family one hundred forty years old. In October of 1972 my pastor visited me in my dorm room and asked if I would speak about seminary life on the Sunday after Christmas, a Sunday no pastor wants to preach on. It wasn't a sermon I gave; it was a speech. But I was understandably nervous, so I thought it best to go into the sanctuary the night before to practice, what some might call practicing what you preach! Our home church, believe it or not, is always unlocked, so when I went into the pulpit that night I discovered that someone had left their calling card on the pulpit. It was the card of the Reverend Charles Eberhardt. He had written on his card, "May God bless the one who preaches here." It was obviously a message intended for our pastor, but I started to think about that name "Eberhardt," so I went home that night and asked my mother for my baptismal certificate. There it was! Charles Eberhardt had baptized me on June 11, 1944. I couldn't believe it. I was unintentionally blessed by the very man who baptized me. My life had come full circle, and I was only 29!

If you think about it, you too have come to Christ through others, people who were intent in making the invisible mark on their forehead visible to everyone around them. Just think! You too could intentionally and even unintentionally blessed someone and, like Charles Eberhardt, never even know it.