

*“The Marks of a Servant”*

Tell me what you see . . .




How do you come to know these?

You have been exposed to them repeatedly (*ad nauseam?*). These, and hundreds, maybe thousands, more like them alert us to products, teams, events, and activities in which we might — or might not — want to participate. What are they called? *“Trademarks”* (some of them are called logos, which to me is an interesting piece of language which comes from the Greek word *λογος* which means “word” and most “logos” have no words in them).

They are marks that help to identify without words. Some of them are so ubiquitous that we begin to wish they would just stop plastering them on everything from billboards, to T-shirts, to busses, to . . . They communicate quickly . . . and if it is the trademark of a company you like, it communicates solidarity, comfort, and satisfaction. That is the aim of every logo/trademark: to help you gain a positive image of the company and its products.

How are these designed? Great amounts of money, careful polling and testing, hundreds of hours with focus groups, careful analysis of data . . . all these go into the design of a trademark.

Like this one: 

While this one was done in the privacy of my office some forty years ago (that’s right, I designed this for The Lutheran Church of the Epiphany in East Avon, New York), it was hardly the stuff of focus groups and art studios . . . just my brain. I think it works . . . but the point is that I don’t know if it really grabs anyone but me . . . even if you all “like it” (no, not

like Facebook), did it give that congregation identity, and if so, what is that identity? I can tell you that it is cruciform on purpose (that is, the cross is at the center, as it must be at the center of who we are and what we do), and that it is called an “Epiphany Star” (who calls it that? I do!).

There is one more “Trademark” that you know quite well, but you cannot see it.

Some years ago a member at Shore Haven Lutheran, where I was the Pastor, was killed by a gunman who was robbing a bar where Ken was drinking; the bar owner was a friend of his. Ken foolishly tried to prevent the robbery, and was shot and killed for his efforts. Ken was a biker, and tattoos were his “trademark”; he was covered I’m guessing over two-thirds of his body. Ken was a Christian, which I knew from the many conversations I had with him, especially when his kids began attending our attending our preschool. At his funeral, I pointed out to his family and friends something they already knew: you could immediately spot Ken by his tattoos.

He bore another mark which they could not see: It was the sign of the cross, marked upon his forehead and his chest, in token that he had been redeemed by Christ the Crucified. You bear that trademark. It is not as recognizable as the VW logo or Olympic rings, but it is there. It is there for you to be aware that it is there, and in that awareness to live like that mark marks you for something.

That “something” is the topic of today’s Gospel. Jesus says in today’s Gospel, “. . . *the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*” By that He was setting forth a principle for all who would follow Him.

The statement comes on the heels of a request from the sons of Zebedee: “*Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.*” That request was bad enough, given the already-reported story we read three weeks ago about the Twelve vying for position of “greatest.” What was worse was their approach leading up to that request:

***“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”***

How many times have your prayers sounded something like that? We are inclined to think that Jesus told us to pray that way and promised that whatever we ask He will give (we seem awfully disappointed when things don't work out our way). We should be neither disappointed nor surprised, because Jesus never promised to give us whatever we want, but commended us to ask “in His Name” — not as some magical formula that unlocks the vaults of heaven, but as a recognition that whatever we ask in prayer has to be tied to Him.

These two disciples would have been far better off had they come with this question: *“Teacher, we want to do whatever you ask of us.”* That would have been a mark of servanthood.

In today's First Lesson we encounter what scholars have come to know as one of the “Suffering Servant Songs” in Isaiah (there are three). As the message of the Gospel unfolds, it becomes clear that these songs are predictive of the life, ministry, passion, and death of Jesus. But the question has been raised for centuries: *“Does this refer to Jesus only?”* I think the answer has to be *“No!”* — largely because I don't think God would be so spurious as to send His prophet Isaiah with a message that amounted to: *“Hey! Israel! You're in exile now and that really is painful and degrading. Cheer up. In about 700 years I will do something about this!”*

So someone or something in Isaiah's time had to have been a referent for this “Suffering Servant” (maybe even Israel itself) — God promising His aid to a people who clearly did not merit it. We call such ideas Gospel, because it is truly Good News that God would deal with us, not according to what we deserve, but on the basis of what we do not deserve. There's a word for that; it's called “grace.”

Pastor Derek Mathers, now the Assistant to our English District the Bishop, before that was the pastor of a church in the north part of Toronto. In his Toronto church there were 37 different languages spoken.

One of those languages is Farsi (from Iran); he does not speak Farsi, so he was preaching in English with a translator. He got to the word “grace” in his sermon and the translator stopped dead . . . Farsi has no word for grace (why does this not surprise us?). What to do? Pastor Mathers simply used the phrase “God’s undeserved love” — that they understood.

Millions of people have little or no understanding of grace. The term gets used when the electric company’s bill arrives and mentions a “grace period” for payment. Some people do think of the term in relation to something supposed to be spoken before a meal, but seldom uttered (although I still recoil at the memory of my first meal in the dining hall in college when an upper classman sat down opposite me and proceeded to intone: “*Rubba-dub-dub, thanks for the grub. Yay, God!*”). Grace for many means having certain social skills in somewhat formal settings, so you know enough not to use the wrong fork and that the finger bowl is not to be sipped.

But this “undeserved love of God” is alien to most, even to many who have received grace in abundance. For example, I point you to Cindy Olsen, part of my cohort in the doctoral program at Ashland, who told me that she had a special appreciation for Lutherans. Growing up in a church that focused on hellfire and brimstone, she had never even heard the word “grace.” As an adult in the Air Force, she became an assistant to the base chaplain, a Lutheran pastor, who spoke to her consistently about God’s grace. She, by the way, is now an ordained Anglican priest, so when I see her, I make it a point to say, “Grace to you, RevDoc.” Because, for her, the idea of grace came, not as something she grew into through childhood, and thus took for granted, but as a whopping huge surprise that suddenly exploded into her life. She is, as a consequence, one of the many servanthood people I have been privileged to have in my life.

Jesus sets up James and John by helping them reflect on what they are asking.

First, he tells them they don’t really comprehend the outcome of their request. “*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with*

*the baptism that I am baptized with?”* We know that they don’t comprehend because of their answer (it seems to come with hair-trigger quickness): *“We are able.”* Translation? *“Piece of cake.”* Of course, we who have looked ahead in the narrative realize that these are two of the same disciples who ran away and left Jesus standing alone, so we kind of smirk to ourselves at their naivete.

Now listen carefully to Jesus’ rejoinder: *“The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized . . .”* In my mind’s eye I see these two sons of Zebedee standing there with a blank look on their faces, as if to say, “Wha’?” Again “of course,” we have looked ahead, and we know the content of that cup and the kind of baptism that awaits — for them.

But how about for us? What will be asked of us? What barriers are coming in our lives? Where will we find life burdensome, troubling, painful, disruptive, depressing? At what point will we be ready to turn tail and just run?

Then Jesus adds: *“And, oh yes, that thing you thought you wanted? “... to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”* Well that’ll take the wind right out of your sails. At this point you have to recall the debate the Twelve had about *“who was the greatest.”* *“You mean, I am not going to be awarded special status in the Kingdom of God?”* First of all, Jesus does not say that; he says that such positions will be given to *“those for whom it has been prepared,”* and that may (emphasize “may”) be you. Second, you already have a status that cannot really be made any more “special” — you are a Child of God. Third, well, there is no third, because the sum and substance of the Christian faith is wrapped up in that identity

I urge you to look at yourself (do it every day when you brush your teeth or comb your hair in front of a mirror) and see the marks of the servant on you, spoken over you at your baptism: *“Child of God, receive the sign of the holy cross as token that you have been redeemed by Christ the crucified.”*

This was Luther's counsel for how to start each day:

*“In the morning when you get up, make the sign of the holy cross and say: ‘In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.’*

*Then, kneeling or standing, repeat the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. If you choose, you may also say this little prayer:*

*‘I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.’*

*Then go joyfully to your work, singing a hymn . . .”*

And please do recall that part of your work is to help others see Him through you.

Amen.