

“Signed, Sealed, and Delivered”

“In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit ...”

A few weeks ago, a member of our congregation came into my office with a document he needed to have me sign on behalf of his father. This happens occasionally when people have forms that need to be certified by certain persons in official positions, and there are times when a congregational pastor is permitted to sign such forms. This form included one additional detail: it needed to have the official seal of our congregation affixed to it. The seal is in my office closet, so I got it out and put the seal in the proper place, which will hopefully satisfy the officials to whom this form will be submitted.

After we had bid each other goodbye and I was putting the seal back in its place, I began to think about the purpose of such seals. The seal of a congregation is an important item that, along with the parish register, needs to be kept on the church premises and used only for proper purposes. When a pastor resigns their call to a congregation, the local dean is often called upon to certify that both the seal and parish register are in the church office and have been properly maintained. But why do congregations need seals, and what purpose do they serve in the life of the church?

As I thought about the purpose and function of such seals, I looked at the wall behind my desk where I display my various degrees and certificates, including the 40th anniversary certificate I received last month at the synod assembly. I see these items every day, but this time I noticed that each of them bear the seal of the school or synod that issued them. Again, I asked myself: what is the purpose of those seals, and why do they need to be attached to these documents?

The practice of affixing a seal to official documents has its origins in contract law and was used as evidence of the authenticity of a contract or legal document. The name “seal” comes from the wax seal that was used throughout history for authentication of documents; monarchs would often wear signet rings with their official seal that they would press into hot wax to “seal” a royal decree or edict. In the Roman Catholic Church, the papal ring may be the most powerful symbol of the

pontiff's authority; as soon as a pope dies, the ring is immediately destroyed to indicate the end of his reign. While government officials in Canada do not wear signet rings, the use of seals in official documents still plays an important role; when a person dies, their heirs are required to produce death certificates with raised seals in the probate process of the state of the deceased. In our immigration and citizenship process, we often had to have our documents notarized to certify that what we were submitting were true copies of our original documents. Seals continue to play an important role in authenticating the document to which they are affixed.

In the ancient world, when a letter or legal document was marked in wax with a seal (*sphragis*) of its author, the seal gave evidence of its authenticity. Biblical authors used the common practice of setting a seal on a document in their description of God placing seals on people to indicate that they were truly children of God, authenticating their identity as those who were chosen by the Lord and under God's protection:

- “They made the rosette of the holy diadem of pure gold, and wrote on it an inscription, like the engraving of a signet, ‘Holy to the ‘LORD.’” – Exodus 39:30.
- “The LORD called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his side, and said to him, ‘Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.’” – Ezekiel 9:3b-4.
- “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging fire.” – Ecclesiastes 8:6.

In the New Testament, the gift of the Holy Spirit that Christians have received in baptism functions as a seal, marking them as belonging to God and under God's protection; it is proof of their adoption as children of God:

- “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” – Galatians 4:6-7.

Paul makes use of this biblical image of a seal as an authentication of one's identity as a child of God in his letter to the Ephesians, which we will be hearing in worship for the next several Sundays. Ephesians is one of thirteen New Testament letters attributed to the Apostle and considered by many one of his greatest works: “*Among the Pauline letters only Romans can match Ephesians as a candidate for exercising*

the most influence on Christian thought and spirituality.” (Raymond Brown). The letter was written to the house churches in the city of Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia and the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire, with a population of approximately 200,000 people. Ephesus was a port city and therefore had a diverse population that flocked to this center of commerce. It was famous for its large and beautiful temple to the goddess Artemis, which was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Ephesus also had a significant Jewish community that had existed for more than three hundred years. Many Jews enjoyed the status of citizens of the city; Jews were allowed to practice their religion, send offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem, and were exempt from military service. The Jewish population of Ephesus comprised some 20,000 people, 10% of the population. The Acts of the Apostles reports that Paul’s mission in Ephesus lasted about three years, longer than anywhere else (*“Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears.”* – Acts 20:31). While the account of his mission in Ephesus in Acts indicates that Paul had some success in the city, his letters indicate that he suffered persecution there and was even imprisoned (*“We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.”* – 2 Corinthians 1:8). After his three-year mission in Ephesus between AD 54-57, Paul left behind many house churches in both Ephesus and the surrounding region, and this letter was intended to circulate both among the churches in Ephesus and among other churches in the province of Asia. Paul’s audience was new to the Christian faith and needed to be strengthened in their Christian identity. Because they lived in a society that worshipped pagan gods, they need to grasp the absolute supremacy of Christ and to understand that the exalted position and spiritual authority that belongs to believers and to the Church is a consequence of Christ’s death resurrection, and ascension.

- “In powerful, poetic language, which was probably drawn from Christian hymns and liturgies, the Letter to the Ephesians celebrates the life of the church, a unique community established by God through the work of Jesus Christ, who is its head, and also the head of the whole creation. The church was established by God’s eternal purpose, and in it believers already live in a union with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit that anticipates the full union in the life to come.” – *The New Oxford Annotated Study Bible*.

Paul begins his letter with an opening blessing in which he fervently praises God for the Lord’s generosity toward the people who belong to Christ: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the*

foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.” (1:3-4). Paul adopts a form of prayer found in the Old Testament called a *berakah* (“blessing”), a prayer that begins with “blessed be God” and immediately states why God should be praised by naming the benefits received from God:

- “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, and blessed be the God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” – Genesis 14:19-20.
- “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who with his hand has fulfilled what he promised with his mouth to my father David ...” – 1 Kings 8:15.
- “Blessed be God, because he has not rejected by prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.” – Psalm 66:20.

The Greek text of 1:3-14 forms one complex sentence, the longest in the New Testament. Paul begins the sentence by praising God for having bestowed on Christians every possible blessing. The rest of the prayer explains what the blessings are and how they come to both Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus. *“The prayer fulfills one of the main purposes of the letter, namely, to help Christians appreciate the extraordinary gifts we have received through Christ.”* (Peter S. Williamson).

Rather than referring to God as “King of the Universe” or “the God of Israel” as is common in such prayers in the Old Testament, Paul’s blessing identifies God as the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he also uses in other letters (*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation ...”* – 2 Corinthians 1:3). God has blessed Christians in every possible way through what Christ has done, including giving us the Holy Spirit and uniting us to Jesus, who is enthroned in heaven. This is a benefit that has already been conferred and has begun to be experienced among God’s people, those who have been chosen *“in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love”* (1:4). God has chosen us out of pure, fatherly love through Jesus Christ, and has *“destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved”* (1:5-6). To be adopted in the Greco-Roman world meant that one enjoyed all the rights and privileges of being born into a family. As God’s children, we are therefore “heirs of God” with a dignity *“so extraordinary that creation itself will be transformed when our identity as sons and daughters of God is fully revealed”* (Williamson), a transformation of which Paul speaks in his Letter to the Romans:

- “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” – Romans 8:19-21.

Paul’s prayer of blessing moves on to describe the role of Christ, through whom “*we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us*” (1:7-8a). “Redemption” has its origins in the act of liberating a person from bondage or slavery, often by the payment of a ransom. As Martin Luther teaches us in his *Small Catechism*, Christ has “*purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.*” God chose to accomplish God’s Will through Christ; God is not reactive but proactive, in control and working out God’s good purposes, “*according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*” (1:9-10).

God’s blessing reaches both Jewish Christians like Paul, those who were “*the first to set our hope on Christ*” (1:12) and also to Gentile Christians like most of his readers, those who “*when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit*” (1:13). Both Jews and Gentiles received the gift of the Holy Spirit as a foretaste of the good things to come not that “*there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” (Galatians 3:28). All who are in Christ have been “*marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit,*” which marks God’s people as belonging to God and under the protection of the Holy Spirit; it is proof of our adoption as sons and daughters of God, for “*in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith*” (Galatians 3:27). The Holy Spirit is described as “promised” because the Old Testament prophets promised that one day God would pour his Spirit upon Israel and on the whole human race:

- “For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.” – Isaiah 44:3.
- “I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.” – Ezekiel 36:27.

- “For then, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, and I will enter into judgment with them there, on account of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations.” – Joel 3:1-2.

In his appearance to his disciples after his resurrection, Jesus the fulfillment of God’s promise: *“And see, I am sending upon you what my Father has promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”* (Luke 24:49). On the day of Pentecost, Peter describes the experience of the Holy Spirit being poured out upon the apostles as the fulfillment of God’s promise: *“Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.”* (Acts 2:33). The gift of the Holy Spirit is the first installment of the inheritance God’s people received as adopted children: *“this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory”* (1:14). The term “pledge” (*arrabon*) is a business term that also means “down payment”; the Holy Spirit is a foretaste and pledge of our inheritance that has already begun and will be fulfilled with eternal life in God’s presence *“to the praise of his glory.”* Recalling God’s blessings leads Paul to worship, overflowing with joy at the generosity of God the Father through Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit to his adopted children. It is in response to God’s blessings that Luther teaches us that we *‘owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.’*

The good news that Paul proclaims to the Christians in Ephesus and the surrounding regions is that through our baptism into Christ we have been born anew to a living hope as children of God and heirs of God’s abundant blessings. This message is the basis for the identity and hope of all Christians who through water and the Word have been reborn children of God through the gift of Holy Baptism. When we gather to celebrate this blessed sacrament, we are reminded that it is through baptism that we are claimed as God’s beloved children, sons and daughters of God who have been *“sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). Bearing the sign of the Cross of Christ through which we receive forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, and being sealed by the Holy Spirit is the mark of our authenticity as God’s children and the basis for our hope that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”* (Romans 6:5). As a physical seal is a sign of the authenticity of a document, our being sealed in God’s Holy Spirit is the sign that we are truly God’s children, *“and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ*

– *if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*” (Romans 8:17).

- “For whoever can say to God from the bottom of the heart, ‘You are my beloved Father and I am your child,’ will obviously defy all the devils from hell, and with a joyful heart despise all the world’s threatening and boasting. For in this Father we have a Lord before whom all creatures must tremble, and without his will they can do nothing. Thus they possess such an inheritance and dominion that no creature can harm or hurt them.” – Luther.

The seals that are set on the degrees and certificates on my office wall authenticate that I did indeed earn these degrees from these schools and was ordained a minister of Word and Sacrament in the Church of Jesus Christ. The seal of the Holy Spirit that is placed upon us in Holy Baptism is the mark of our authenticity as God’s beloved children and the basis of our hope that because we are God’s children, *“sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever,”* we live and serve in the sure and certain hope that because we are children of the Heavenly Father that therefore *“neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever; his the loving purpose solely to preserve them, pure and holy.”*

Amen.