

DEEPER WATER IN OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

(13 Weeks— 10 Meetings)

SMALL GROUP PACKET **Into the Deep Water with Christ**

HEALTHY SMALL GROUPS

(Please review the following regularly together as a group)

GUIDELINES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR “DEEP WATER” SMALL GROUPS

- Try to keep your group size from two to six people. The larger the group, the more time it will take at each meeting for everyone to participate and share actively.
- Try to meet together once a week, on average.
- Meet in a place that is conducive to listening and speaking. Loud, crowded restaurants, for example, will probably not work too well.
- Everyone should bring a bible, a pen, and this packet to each of their small group meetings.
- This packet, focusing on Baptism, has enough material to cover 10 weeks’ worth of meetings. On October 20th, a new packet of materials will become available for the next part of our “deeper water” journey.
- **Buffer weeks:** We are adding three *additional weeks* to this session, so that **you have 13 weeks in order to cover 10 weeks’ worth of materials**. Your group can use these extra two weeks to 1) catch up if your group has to miss a weekly meeting or two, or 2) If your discussions go long on some weeks, you can use the extra time to spread things out and/or backtrack as necessary.
- While it is not a requirement, we recommend that men partner with men, and women partner with women.
- You do not need to designate any particular person in your group to be a facilitator or leader. Just follow the materials together and agree on a time limit to your meetings.
- Allow extended silences to happen during your small group discussions. The bible is a challenging book and the Word can sometimes shake our thoughts up at first before bringing them around towards Christ. Silence allows time for the Spirit to give us speech.
- While you are discussing with your group, always jot down thoughts that the group shares.
- It is likely that you will encounter different Bible translations within your group. If the group feels this is an obstacle to understanding or discussion, discuss the possibility of procuring bibles of the same translation for everyone. The New Revised Standard Version, which St. John’s uses at worship, is an example of a well-balanced, readable and accurate translation. Call Pastor Seth (217.255.2118) or Pastor Patti (614.875.2314) if you need any help or guidance regarding Bible translations.
- Try your best to participate as a group (or as individuals) in the “Come Back to Shore” meeting on October 13th.
- On October 20th, we will start a new topic in our Deep Water journey: *Deeper Water in our Caring Ministry*. Every time we begin a new topic (about every two-three months), small groups and partnerships can reconfigure themselves as necessary. As you approach the end of each topic, please talk intentionally about how and whether your group will continue into the next topic together intact, or what changes you need to make based on your personal schedules, etc. While we encourage everyone to plug in to as much of our

deep water journey as possible through the next few years, we also understand that some of us will need to drop out and rejoin at various points in the journey.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PRINCIPLE TO FOLLOW IN YOUR SMALL GROUP: CONFIDENTIALITY

- Keeping things confidential is vital to establishing trust and open communication with your partner or small group. Be sure to acknowledge this rule clearly with each other at the beginning of your journey together, and regularly over the course of the following weeks. What is said in your small group should stay in your small group!

REMEMBER: PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT MEMBERS OF ST. JOHN’S ARE WELCOME TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS JOURNEY!

We encourage you to invite non-members to participate. Think of a friend with whom you’d like to take this journey, and invite them to jump in.

IF YOU LOSE YOUR PACKET, OR NEED MORE PACKETS

Hard copies are always available in the church office, in the display in the Link (breezeway) at church, or from one of the pastors. You can download a packet from our St. John’s website: <https://www.stjohnsgc.org/> If you have a printer, you can request an electronic copy of the packet by email: SJersild@stjohnsgc.org Just remember, the packets can be over 40 pages long!

IF YOUR SMALL GROUP IS STRUGGLING OR DISSOLVES

Call Pastor Seth at 217.255.2118 if you need help or have special concerns. Remember that Pastor Seth and Pastor Patti will be meeting with two separate Deep Water small groups **every Sunday morning during the Sunday school hour**. If you are not part of a regular small group, just come to their Sunday meetings. They are open to all and you can plug into them at any time.

SMALL GROUP INFORMATION

(Names, phone, email etc.)

Into the Deep Water with Christ
DEEPER WATER IN OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

WEEK #1 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: July 21-27, 2019

1. Confirm as a group what your time limit is going to be. Over time, each group will develop a natural feel for what kind of pace they need to maintain in order to fit everyone's schedules.
2. Please review the material under the heading "Healthy Small Groups" together, above.
3. Emphasize together the extreme importance of keeping what you share in this group confidential. Also, make sure you have each others' phone numbers, email addresses, and etc. for communication purposes.
4. Please, especially note our practice of adding **buffer weeks** for each topic (from the "Healthy Small Groups" section, above). Remember, you will have 13 weeks in which to cover 10 weeks' worth of meetings.
5. Spend about 5 minutes having everyone share high points and low points from the last several days.
6. OPENING PRAYER
 - Designate someone to pray the prayer in italics, below. Always feel free to improvise as the Spirit moves you. You can use the written prayer loosely, as a model. Special intercessions can be added.

Loving Father, thank you for this opportunity to come together and learn more about the precious gift you have given us in Baptism. Remind us each day that we are your beloved children, and that nothing can separate us from your love. Open our hearts and minds to hear your Word, and make us agents of your love and support in each others' lives. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

7. Have someone in your group read this statement of our goals for this unit on Baptism aloud:

During the next weeks as we go deeper in our Baptismal identity, we pray that God will help us understand Baptism as...

- *A pure gift of grace, where God promised total forgiveness to us for all time in Christ, with no strings attached.*
- *A gift to which we can return each day as we wage spiritual warfare against temptation, sin, and the power of evil.*
- *The event through which God gave us a new identity in Jesus, saying “You are my own beloved child, with who I am well pleased.”*
- *Our God-given birth into the family of God, the Church.*
- *The beginning of a life of service and witness to Christ and his kingdom.*

8. **Listening skills:** Have someone read the following aloud:

Remember that practicing good listening skills with each other will have a big impact on how well we can encourage and support each other as we continue going into deeper water with Christ.

We will read each of the following statements aloud. After each statement, each of us in turn will rate ourselves on a scale of 1-5 in response to the statement. 1=never and 5=always. Everyone should record their own answers as we go.

- I don't give others time to speak, because I tend to go “on a roll” and end up monopolizing the conversation. 1 2 3 4 5
- I give people my undivided attention when I'm listening. 1 2 3 4 5
- I interrupt people when I talk. 1 2 3 4 5
- I ask questions after listening to someone, rather than immediately providing answers. 1 2 3 4 5
- I tend to look away from people when I'm talking with them (I lose eye contact) 1 2 3 4 5
- I make repeated and sympathetic eye contact with people when they are speaking to me. 1 2 3 4 5
- I tend to fidget with pencils, papers and etc. while in conversation. 1 2 3 4 5
- I think I use facial expressions well in order to communicate that I'm listening. 1 2 3 4 5
- I don't smile during conversations, making people somewhat afraid to talk to me. 1 2 3 4 5
- I smile often, inviting people to talk further. 1 2 3 4 5

- k. I go off the subject often, with my questions and comments. 1 2 3 4 5
- l. I ask questions which invite people to further explain themselves and put things in their own words. 1 2 3 4 5
- m. I tend to throw cold water on others' suggestions or thoughts, so they quit making suggestions and sharing thoughts after a while. 1 2 3 4 5
- n. I often affirm what others are saying and am good at encouraging them to let go and open up. 1 2 3 4 5
- o. I tend to communicate that I am rushed for time, making comments about how busy my day is. 1 2 3 4 5
- p. People know that they have my full attention almost all the time. 1 2 3 4 5

9. Someone please read this aloud: *Based on your responses to the items under "listening skills," above, set some concrete, positive goals for yourself for the next few weeks, regarding good listening skills. We will revisit this topic in this week's homework.*

10. Spend some time discussing the following with your partner(s). This is just a smattering of varied material meant to help get our minds rolling on the subject matter we will be discussing in the next few weeks. Write down anything that you or your partner(s) says which strikes you during your conversation.

- When you think of your own life, try to identify two or three key *events* that shaped who you are more than any others. Without monopolizing the group's time, share a little bit about these events.
- Think of ONE of your parents. Each of you, in turn, fill in the blanks in the following sentences about the parent you've chosen:

"My [*father's/mother's*] name is/was _____. From my experience, the most important three things in my father's life were/are: 1)_____, 2)_____, and 3)_____."

- Look at the following list of "identity statements." Some might not apply to you at all and you might want to add others that are not on the list. Give yourselves time to pick out the *top ten statements* that describe you right now. Then rank those ten statement in order of the power you think each has in your life. Please do not rank them in the order you THINK they should be, but rather, in the order that they actually have in your life right now. Don't overthink it—move quickly over the list and follow your honest gut

response. When you are finished, share your list with the group. Feel free to discuss and explain anything as you go.

I am a parent.	I am a (name your profession).	I am a student.
I am baptized.	I am a brother/sister.	I am an American.
I am a Grove Citian.	I am retired.	I am white.
I am a minority.	I am worried.	I am poor.
I am rich.	I am running out of resources.	I am sick.
I am hurting.	I am lonely.	I am confident.
I am happy.	I am a servant.	I am an encourager.
I am a volunteer.	I am a manager.	I am an organizer.
I am critical.	I am detached.	I am joyful.
I am forgiven.	I am accepted.	I am loved.
I am appreciated.	I am angry.	I am powerless.
I am unsure.	I am ready.	I am a Christian.
I am frustrated.	I am anxious.	Other...

- Think of your recent experiences being at worship when a baptism takes place (say, in the last five years). What are some feelings, thoughts, observations that have come to mind while you are participating in the sacrament? In general, what do you think is going on at a Baptism? What questions might typically come into your mind? Concerns? What part of the Baptism liturgy tends to strike you the most? What gives you joy in the Baptismal service? What part of it would you say you understand least, and are most curious about?

11. Please open your bibles and read **John 3:1-21** together (you might divvy up the passage between multiple readers). After you're finished reading, please respond to the following questions as a group.

- On what does Nicodemus base his assumption that Jesus must be a teacher from God (v. 2)?
- Jesus does indeed perform signs of power throughout the gospels, but clearly is trying to get Nicodemus to comprehend a higher truth: the necessity of a total transformation of a person—a new birth “from above” (see vv 3-9). What does Jesus say in verse 5?
- Put into words your understanding of what Jesus is saying when he talks about a new “birth from above,” by water and the Spirit?
- What do you think is causing Nicodemus so much confusion in this passage?

- One of the major themes in John’s gospel is how human beings, in sin, seek their own path and identity in life while using bits of religion to boost their efforts. For example, in this passage, Nicodemus has come to Jesus to “rub shoulders with the miracle worker.” How is what Jesus says to Nicodemus here a complete repudiation of human efforts to build themselves up with bits of religion? How is baptism a complete death of all such efforts?
- What does being “born from above” mean when it comes to where we ultimately take our cues from in our actions and words towards other people?

12. In turn, without going into too much depth about each situation, share one or two specific issues that you would like your partner(s) to pray about for you this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.

13. Remind each other that there’s homework to do (below) before each group meeting. The homework material provides the substance for each group meeting. Confirm the time and place of your next gathering. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.

14. Close with prayer. Have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer. Include a prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit to guide your group and fill you with confidence and determination as you get started on this journey together.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (2nd) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer aloud; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.

Almighty God, I thank you for sending Jesus into this world and into my life, so that I can know you and love you, through him, as my Heavenly Father. Speak to me now as I study your holy Word. Give me courage and faith to go deeper in my discipleship for you, that I may glorify you in all that I do. Use me as an instrument of your Holy Spirit to draw the people around me into your loving presence. Amen.

2. Go back to the material from your first small group session and review your responses, which you shared with your group, under “listening skills.” (Item 8, page 5) Set some positive goals to help improve your listening skills in the next weeks with your partners. Think about your responses, and then complete the following sentence:

“In order to grow in my listening skills with my small group partner(s), I’m going to try to.....”

3. Please read **Matthew 3:1-17**, and then respond in writing to the following material:

- What was John the Baptist’s basic proclamation (3:2)?
- Why do you think droves of people (vv.5-6) would want to go out to the wilderness to be baptized by John? What different motives might people have had?
- John makes a distinction between his baptism and the approaching Messiah’s (Jesus’) baptism (vv.11-12). After letting these verses sink in, please write down what you think John is getting at when he describes the difference between the two baptisms.
- Here at the beginning of Matthew, John the Baptist clearly presents the approaching Messiah as *final judge*, as if the end of the world and the last judgment is about to happen. In light of what you know about the rest of Jesus’ story, write down how you think John is right about Jesus, but not exactly in the way John expected (remember, John was puzzled by what he saw Jesus doing later in his ministry [see Matthew 11:1-6]).
- When Jesus comes to John to be baptized, what is John’s first response to him?
- Jesus is without sin, which seems to make his own baptism unnecessary. So, what do you think he means when he tells John, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness”? Why is Jesus wanting to be baptized?
- What is significant about the fact that getting baptized is the *first* thing Jesus does in his public ministry? What does it mean for us, *who have been baptized*, to see Jesus baptized at the *beginning* of his struggles on our behalf?
- What happens when Jesus comes up out of the water (v.16)?

- Clearly something huge is happening when the “heavens opened” and the “Spirit of God descended on him like a dove and alighted upon him.” This is the same Spirit that moved over the waters at the beginning of creation (Genesis 1:1-2). Meditate on this image of 1) Jesus coming up out of the water; 2) the heavens opening; 3) the Spirit alighting on him. In the space below, write down how you understand the RECONNECTION that is taking place between God and the world in this event, and how it is all centered in on this person, Jesus.

 - What does the voice from heaven say when Jesus is baptized? Is the gospel of Matthew crystal clear about *who heard* the voice when it spoke? What is the significance of this divine pronouncement coming at the Baptism of the Son, at the beginning of his public ministry? What does this affirm for us, as we read the rest of the story?
4. The baptism account in Matthew sets us up to see Jesus, through the rest of the gospel, as
- The bringer of a new creation (a new Genesis) into this world
 - The point of reconnection between a dying, closed-off world and its Creator
 - The willing carrier of human sins
 - The fulfiller of all righteousness.
 - The Beloved Son of God
- From what you know of the rest of Jesus’ story, how does his role as the *Bringer of a New Creation* manifest itself most often in his dealings with the people he meets?

 - What does it mean to you, that Jesus was willing to share in human sin (not to commit sin, but to *carry* it) throughout his ministry?

 - Write down what it means to you, that Jesus came into the world intending to fulfill all righteousness *for you*.
5. Please read **Matthew 4:1-11**, and then respond in writing to the material below.
- What is the first thing that happens to Jesus after his baptism?

- With what phrase does the devil frame his temptations in 4:3 and 4:6?
- How, in your own words, is the devil seeking to pull Jesus away from his true identity (i.e. “This is my Son, the Beloved”)?
- What do all of the devil’s temptations have in common? What—in a general sense—is he trying to get Jesus to do with his power?
- To what authority does Satan appeal in his temptations?
- What is Jesus’ response to all the temptations, in terms of how he will use his power?
- To what authority does Jesus appeal, in his responses to the devil?
- In the space below, make connections between Jesus’ baptism and his temptation.
- What do these two episodes in Jesus’ life (baptism and temptation) tell us about the role of baptism in our spiritual warfare against temptation and the power of the evil one? How is the notion of *living out of our true identity*—so prevalent in both of these passages—the key point to which we return as we engage in our struggles as believers?
- Fill the blank space in the phrase below with your first name:

“_____ , you are my son/daughter, my beloved, and I am well pleased with you.” -God
- Look at the phrase, above, with your name in it, and let it sink in. In the space below, write down some thoughts in response. What does this statement mean to you? How does it make you feel? Do you believe this is what God says to you through your Baptism? Do you ever doubt it? Do you sometimes *forget* it? If so, describe the situations and reasons you may doubt or forget it.

6. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns from your first group meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John’s as we follow Jesus’

call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective “fishers of people.”

Into the Deep Water with Christ
DEEPER WATER IN OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

WEEK #2 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: July 28—August 3, 2019

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Heavenly Father, we thank you for bringing us together today to study your Word and to support each other in our walk of faith. Help us to listen to each other with open hearts and minds. We thank you for the new life and forgiveness you have given us in Christ, and we pray that you will remove all fear from our hearts as we follow your call to let go of our old lives, that we may live for you alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.
3. Go back to the homework you all did for this session, starting on page 8. **Discuss items 3-5** (Jesus' baptism and temptation in the gospel of Matthew) as a group. After you finish, return here and continue with item #4, below.
4. In turn, without going into too much depth about each situation, share one or two specific issues that you would like your partner(s) to pray about for you this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer. Include a prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit to guide your group and fill you with confidence and determination as you continue this journey together.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (3rd) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer aloud; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your

salvation, and uphold me with your free spirit. Make me an agent of your love towards all. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2. This week we will take a close look at some elements in the service of Holy Baptism from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (pp. 227-31), and explore some bible passages that help us understand what is happening in the sacrament.
3. Please read the opening statement from the Baptism liturgy:

God, who is rich in mercy and love, gives us a new birth into a living hope through the sacrament of baptism. By water and the Word God delivers us from sin and death and raises us up to new life in Jesus Christ. We are united with all the baptized in the one body of Christ, anointed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and joined in God's mission for the life of the world.

- Describe the direction of the action that is pictured in the above language. Who is active and who is passive?
- By what two things tied together in the sacrament does God deliver us from sin and death and raise us up to new life in Jesus Christ?
- Not only are we united with Jesus in baptism, but also with “all the baptized.” In your own words, describe the unity we share as God’s Church in baptism.
- In Baptism God brings a new, overarching purpose to our lives: we are “joined in God’s mission for the life of the world.” The most pertinent scripture passage here is Matthew 28:19-20: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” In the space below, express how you understand your own role as part of this overarching mission in the world, at this point in your life. Speak in general terms.

4. In the next part of the liturgy, the sponsors of the person being baptized say (regardless of whether he/she is a baby or an adult): “I present _____ for baptism.”

Notice that the sponsors’ presentation comes *before* the person (or the parents of the baby) expresses their own desire to be baptized. There is great significance in this simple detail. It emphasizes the biblical truth that ***we sinners do not come to God unless he first uses someone else to bring us to him.*** In our Lutheran baptismal liturgy, we emphasize the role of the Holy

Spirit working through the Church (through people) in order to bring God's Word of salvation and life to us.

We do not emphasize an individual's choice when it comes to being saved. Nowhere in the Bible does such a choice take place without God first sending an *agent of salvation*—whether with words or with saving deeds—into a person's life. This is one of the key biblical truths underpinning our Lutheran (and Orthodox, Roman Catholic and most other mainline Protestant denominations') practice of infant Baptism. For us, the role of the Holy Spirit working through God's Church is of paramount importance in a person's ongoing faith life. We do not put any stock in individuals' decisions or promises, when it comes to salvation.

- In the space below, write your response to the above explanation of why the sponsor *presents* the person for Baptism before anything else takes place in the service.
- What is the danger in highlighting a person's expression of desire, intellectual understanding, and/or sense of personal commitment as an essential prerequisite to being baptized?
- When it comes to baptism, what does a theology of "personal decision," as practiced by some Christians, say about the relationship between human decisions and God's activity? If I decide first for God before God responds with the blessings of baptism to me, who is really in the driver's seat when it comes to this sign of salvation?
- When Lutherans identify *who is Christian*, we emphasize the objective sign of Baptism. We point to what God has done for a person rather than how a person appears (in our eyes) to respond to God. When other Christian groups say it is essential for a person to "decide for Jesus" in order to be saved, they invariably start looking for the signs of "true Christianity" in terms of religious things that people do. Here are some examples (from an endless list) of things that can become "essential to true Christianity" when we start emphasizing the human response to God rather than what God has done for people:
 - how people act when they worship.
 - the mechanics of how baptism is performed (e.g. "dunking" becomes essential).
 - emphasizing certain bible verses that other denominations don't
 - having a special "born again" experience
 - speaking in tongues
 - marking particular observances as "non-biblical" (Christmas, etc.)
 - emphasizing the moral superiority of wealth, or poverty (either way)
 - taking constant issue with what people do in other denominations

The list is endless because sinners will always find something to quarrel about. In the space below, write about any experiences you've had with types of religion that

emphasize people's subjective response to God over what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. How does (or should) our Lutheran emphasis on Baptism keep us grounded in what is *essential* in Christian faith?

- Luther fully recognized the dangers inherent in the practice of infant Baptism. People have always substituted the biblical understanding of it with a notion that a magic ritual is taking place...a ritual that can be seen apart from the power of the Holy Spirit active in the ongoing life of the Church. What happens when people see Baptism as a “fire-insurance” ritual apart from ongoing immersion in the life of God's people?

5. Only *after* a person is presented for Baptism *by others* are they asked: “_____, called by the Holy Spirit, trusting in the grace and love of God, do you desire to be baptized into Christ?”

Here we recognize a person's subjective, positive response to the power of the Holy Spirit: “YES! I want this!” In the case of a child who can't speak for him/herself, the parents (whose faith in Christ is enough for the baby), express their desire on the baby's behalf. When the child gets older, he/she will have the opportunity to say this beautiful “yes” to God at confirmation. Baptism enables sinful human beings to approach the throne of God with confidence. Share your thoughts on how Jesus makes it possible for us to say “yes” to God.

6. In the case of an infant baptism, the next part of the liturgy calls the parents, sponsors, and the whole congregation to commit themselves to raise this child in the faith of the Church:

You are entrusted with responsibilities:
to live with ___ among God's faithful people,
bring ___ to the Word of God and the Holy Supper,
teach___ the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments,
place in ___ hands the holy scriptures...(etc.)

At the time of confirmation (Affirmation of Baptism), when a child is old enough to speak for him/herself, he/she says “yes” to God's promise in Baptism and commits himself/herself personally to these same activities. We are not going to go into an in-depth discussion of each of these commitments now, but will look at them at a later date. The point for now, again, is that we Lutherans emphasize the role of God's Church (parents in particular) in surrounding the Baptized with the love of God, teaching them the Word, immersing them in worship, inspiring them to joyful giving and service, and nurturing them in the sacraments.

- In the space below, talk briefly about the role other people had in nurturing *you* in the Christian faith, and how you saw the Holy Spirit active in those relationships.

7. The next part of the Baptism liturgy is the threefold rejection of the Enemy and his ways:

Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?

I renounce them.

Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?

I renounce them.

Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?

I renounce them.

Note how the theme of spiritual warfare enters into the service here. The Baptized (along with the whole congregation) voice their open rejection of the powers that seek to draw them away from God. The close connection between Baptism and striving against Evil directly echoes the story of Jesus' Baptism and his subsequent contest with Satan in the wilderness. Through Baptism, God brings each of us into that contest—not as pawns in the power-struggle but as confident soldiers for Christ.

One of the great gifts of our faith in Jesus Christ is that when we come to know our Savior, we also gain clarity regarding the powers of sin and evil that are assaulting us and the world. Through Jesus, we come to understand our extreme vulnerability as human beings, and the vastness of the Evil One's might. If we cannot see or recognize the enemy, he has a much greater ability to influence us, make us feel helpless, and keep us in a state of confusion.

For example, many people in today's world scoff at the idea of sin, but then turn around and blame other human beings for everything. It is now common for us to demonize people with whom we don't agree, in our politics and our civil life. Without recognizing the power of evil, we also underestimate its power all the time. Thus we keep on coming up with "solutions" to our civil problems that cause more harm than good, since the power of sin is greater than our ability to "fix" things with law and education. As believers, we understand that the solution to the world's problems is not more and better laws, nor is it better education. These good things definitely make the world a better place to live. But in the end, our only hope is God himself, and God has sent us a Champion to fight by our side.

- In the space below, talk about how you understand our Baptism into Christ as a springboard for *spiritual warfare*. How does our Baptismal faith give us power to renounce Satan and stand against the powers of sin and evil in the world?
- Try to identify a time in your own life when your faith in Christ enabled you to stand against temptation, confront evil openly, or take a tough course of action

when it would have been a lot easier to stay quiet or give in. Describe the experience below and talk about how your faith in Jesus helped you.

- How does our recognition of Satan’s power in the world actually enable us to be *more sympathetic and compassionate* towards other human beings who behave differently than we do, and who might hold different values and beliefs than we do?

8. The next component in the Baptism service—the profession of faith, typically using the words of the Apostle’s Creed—can be thought of as our “shorthand” way of recounting the crucial Biblical events and beliefs that shape us as a people. We will not go into detailed discussion of the Creed during this session. For today, express your general understanding of why we use the Creed in worship like we do, and why it’s used in the order of Baptism.

9. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns from your first group meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John’s as we follow Jesus’ call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective “fishers of people.”

DEEPER WATER IN OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

WEEK #3 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: August 4-10, 2019

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Lord God, we give you thanks for all the gifts you have given us in this life: our family, friendships, and the beauty of your creation. Most of all, we thank you for sending Jesus into the world to save us from the powers that seek to enslave us. Lift us up, Lord God, and set us free by the blood of Christ to live our lives in joy and confidence as your sons and daughters. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen
3. Go back to your homework for last week, starting on page 12. As a group, discuss your responses to **items 3-7** concerning the first part of the Baptism service which we follow in our

hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number 4, below.

4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (4TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer aloud; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.

Heavenly Father, I thank you for you for the gifts, talents and abilities that you have given me, and I pray for a spirit of discernment, that I might continue to find ways that I can best serve you and build up your holy Church on earth. Bless the work of your people throughout the world, and make us strong in our witness to you, so that people may be drawn to Christ and find eternal life in him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2. This week, we will continue looking closely at the Baptism liturgy from our hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. The next part of the service is the Thanksgiving at the Font. Please read the words of the Thanksgiving:

We give you thanks, O God, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and by your Word you created the world, calling forth life in which you took delight. Through the waters of the flood you delivered Noah and his family, and through the sea you led your people Israel from slavery into freedom. At the river your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit. By the baptism of Jesus' death and resurrection you set us free from the power of sin and death and raise us up to live in you.

- Note the importance of *water* in the four major Biblical episodes recounted here. Review the passages below, and use the space below each to describe in your own words the role that water plays in each.

-Creation (review Genesis 1:1-10)

-Flood (review Genesis chapters 7-8)

-Triumph at the Sea (review Exodus 14:10-31)

-Jesus' Baptism (review Matthew 3:13-17)

- In the space below, make as many theological connections as you can between all four of the above passages. How would you describe the overarching theological significance of water in *all* these Bible events?

3. Next in the Baptism liturgy, the minister sprinkles or pours water over the head of the baptized three times, or immerses the baptized completely under water, saying:

“(Name), I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Interestingly, Martin Luther expressed his feeling that total immersion was the way to go, because he thought immersion captured the totality of God's action in Baptism—the complete dying of the old person and the rising of the new person in Christ. However, unlike later ultra-protestants, Luther never wanted to draw legal lines around the mechanics of how we perform the sacrament such as “you *must* be immersed, or it isn't baptism.” For Lutherans, this kind of legalism distorts people's understanding of what is actually happening in this precious event.

One of the priceless gifts we receive through Jesus is the full revelation of God's *name* (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). In sin, we come up with our own names and images for God in an attempt to project our human power over him and life in general. Jesus is God's full and final revelation to us of his own name, on his own terms.

The name of the Holy Trinity, in a sense, carries the entire biblical story of the God who creates us, saves us, and sustains us with his life and power. Through that story, we can now recognize him and distinguish him from all other gods that would have us give them our loyalty. Knowing his true name, we can trust God and call on him personally. He is no longer hidden from us in total mystery; through his name he is present to us, and we are in a relationship with him. In our baptism in his name, we are grafted into his story. We become part of his life.

- Baptism with water in the Triune name of God is the heart of the sacrament. In your own words, describe what God is doing through the Word and the water as the water is being poured over the baptized.

4. Next comes the prayer for the Holy Spirit for the baptized:

“We give you thanks, O God, that through water and the Holy Spirit you give your daughters and sons new birth, cleanse them from sin, and raise them to eternal life. Sustain _____ with the gift of your Holy Spirit; the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever.”

In many New Testament texts the Spirit comes upon people before they are baptized; in others, the Spirit comes afterwards. Lutherans don’t presume to know or predict the Spirit’s timing when it comes to these things. We simply emphasize God’s promise and his objective action for us in Jesus Christ and are confident that the Holy Spirit is acting in the Word given at Baptism. The Spirit is certainly active in the members of the Church who are bringing the person to the font and who will surround him/her with the love of Christ as she/he continues in faith.

The Holy Spirit brings the life and power of God into the creation which he has formed through the Word. God breathed his own life into Adam (Genesis 2). In sin, the world is generally shut off from (and blinded to) the power of life, so it doesn’t have a future anymore. This is why it is so significant that at Jesus’ baptism, the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. Life is now flowing into the dying world again through Jesus. Through Jesus, the world is now connected to the future God has planned for it. Everywhere Jesus goes in the gospels, signs of new life and power (healings, exorcisms, and miracles) spring up around him. Now, through Baptism, you and I have been “anointed” with the Holy Spirit. Following Jesus in faith, we become agents of God’s life and power towards the people around us!

- In your own words, what does this look like—that we are agents of God’s life and power to the people around us—in everyday life?
- Where, recently, do you think you have seen signs of the Holy Spirit working in people?

5. After the prayer for the Holy Spirit, the minister makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the baptized (often using oil) with the following words:

“_____, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”

The age-old use of *oil* in many Christian ritual actions has rich significance: Olives (the usual source of the oil) are crushed violently in order to produce the oil, which was often used as a cleansing agent and also as a source of fuel for lamps.

This calls to mind how Jesus was crushed and broken for our sins. Out of his cleansing suffering and death flows the new life and power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit brings us healing and guiding light. Though the sealing with oil is not regarded as a sacrament, Lutherans generally love the sacramental quality of this kind of ritual, where a humble physical substance is used to literally touch us and remind us of how our broken sinful lives are being completely lifted up into the healing life and activity of God. Our worldly sufferings because of sin are all being transformed through Jesus into “fuel” and light by which a new world shines its power into this one for our sake.

- Meditate on the image of your worldly sufferings and struggles being transformed through Jesus into light and power—something that can actually direct us and others towards God and his promise of a future for us. How does this idea strike you, personally, right now? Have you experienced a time when you looked back and saw that your trials—and perhaps even your sufferings—worked to bring glory to God? Share your experience(s), below.

The image of being *sealed* with the Holy Spirit comes from Ephesians 1:13-14:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

These verses create a rich analogy: through Jesus we are “sealed” like a scroll (or in modern terms, like an envelope), paid for and ready for delivery when the new world arrives fully. The Holy Spirit *is* the seal in which we are now carried and protected, and he is also the “downpayment” to us of our future inheritance. The journey is not yet over; the fullness of the Kingdom has not yet come. But in the meantime we are secure, enfolded in the power of the Spirit. We can count on the promise that we will be delivered into the right hands.

- How in your own words does the image of being “sealed” and “carried” by the Holy Spirit help you understand your continuing journey through the trials of life, and how does this part of the Baptism service make you feel about the big picture of your life as a believer?

Being *marked with the cross of Christ forever* can be thought of as “God’s shorthand signature” on us. Whenever we hear the name of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we are encouraged to make the sign of the cross over ourselves in remembrance of our Baptism, when God “signed his name” on us.

- When you sign your name on a document, what are the implications?
- When an artist puts their name on a work of music or art, or when Adidas emblazons their name on their sports equipment, what are they doing?
- What are some of the potential risks you are taking when you put your name on something?
- How do your responses to the above three bullet points help you understand what God is doing (what promises is he making and what risks is he taking) in Baptism, when he puts his name on us?

6. In the next part of the Baptism service, a small candle (the Baptismal candle) is lit from the big Paschal (Christ) candle, and given to the Baptized or to one of his/her sponsors with the following words:

“Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)

The symbolism of this act is straightforward: we are united with Christ in Baptism. His light becomes our light, which we are to shine in the world. In the case of infant baptism, the parents and sponsors take on the job of shining God’s light into the child’s life (following through on the baptismal commitments they’ve made), so that the child will come to know Jesus through them. As we grow in years, we ourselves take the initiative in shining the light of Christ for others, not keeping him to ourselves or hiding our faith out of fear. As you can see, as we come to the end of the Baptism service, our mission as Jesus’ followers in the world comes to the fore.

- What are some ways you can shine your light before others, as an individual, so that they can see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven?

- What are some factors in today's world that can make it challenging to "shine our light?"
- Spend some time imagining God's Church in terms of the following analogies. Respond to each:

-a bunch of people with flashlights spread out in a dark forest.

-a beautiful lit-up city on a hill at night.

-a campfire.

-a lighthouse on the seashore.

-a security light that comes on when motion is detected outside a home.

7. The Baptism liturgy closes with the whole congregation welcoming the newly baptized:

We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world.

8. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns from your first group meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

DEEPER WATER IN OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

WEEK #4 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: August 11-17

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Holy Spirit, direct us in all we do towards our Savior, Jesus Christ. Keep us deeply rooted and grounded in him, that we will serve him faithfully and give our lives generously to the work of his Church. Help us to love each other as the Father loves us, and guide us to new insights today as we study your Word together. In Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Go back to your homework for last week, starting on page 17. As a group, discuss your responses to **items 2-7**, concerning the second part of the Baptism service which we follow in our hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number 4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (5TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer aloud; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.
Lord God, lift me up, heal me, and renew me. Help me to give my life completely into your hands and to trust in your will for me. Be with (my small group partner[s]), help them to know your constant love for them. I thank you for all that we have been able to share in our meetings. Help us to continue to lovingly uphold and support each other in this journey, and make us faithful to you in all that we do. In Jesus' name. Amen.
2. Please read **Romans 6:1-14** and respond to the material which follows:
 - To what question is Paul responding with this passage (v.1)?

- Express what Paul is saying in your own words: “Therefore we have been buried with him by Baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”
- Paul here describes Baptism as a total death and a new creation. Elsewhere, though, he fully acknowledges the ongoing temptation and potential power of sin in a Christian’s life. With that in mind, how do you understand what he says here: “The death [Christ] died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

It seems that I now have a choice as to how I “consider myself.” Before faith in Jesus, I was trapped in sin and did not see any choice but to be the way I was. Now, with faith in Jesus, I can see my sin, stand apart from it, and choose to resist it because I’ve been given a new starting point from which to see all of life. Jesus has given me a freedom to choose which I did not have before. This theme crops up in several places in Paul’s letters. In your own words, how do you understand how our Baptism in Jesus’ death has given us freedom to consider ourselves “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus?”

- In the late medieval western Church (before the Reformation), it was widely taught that Baptism erased original sin up to the point of baptism, but that each person would have to do penance (pay the price for the sins they commit) through various religious activities (praying, fasting, attending worship, etc.) in order to free themselves from the sins they accumulate after baptism. How is this “partial” view of baptism’s effectiveness very different from that Paul says in this passage?
- Based on the late medieval western theology teaching on baptism, as described above, why did it make sense for a lot of people (especially the rich and powerful) to delay their own baptism till the time of their death?
- Whereas Paul is describing the total death of one creature and the birth of another in God, the notion that we humans “work off” our debts little by little in order to achieve the final goal of life—whatever we think it might be—is obviously alive and well in the world. In the space below, describe where you have seen the human-centered notion of “saving ourselves” in action in today’s world (not necessarily always clothed in religious language). To what kinds of deep disappointment and frustration can it lead?

- If God is the one who acts in baptism to completely “bury us” and “raise us up,” then what is our only possible response to baptism? Explain your response.

3. Please read the following passage from Martin Luther’s essay, “The Holy Sacrament of Baptism” (*Luther’s Works, Vol. 35 pp. 29-43*), and then respond to the material which follows.

“For just as a child is drawn out of his mother’s womb and is born, and through this fleshly birth is a sinful person and a child of wrath [Eph. 2:3], so one is drawn out of baptism and is born spiritually. Through this spiritual birth he is a child of grace and a justified person. Therefore sins are drowned in baptism, and in place of sin, righteousness comes forth.

This significance of baptism—the dying or drowning of sin—is not fulfilled completely in this life. Indeed this does not happen until man passes through bodily death and completely decays to dust. As we can plainly see, the sacrament or sign of baptism is quickly over. But the spiritual baptism, the drowning of sin, which it signifies, lasts as long as we live and is completed only in death. Then it is that a person is completely sunk in baptism, and that which baptism signifies comes to pass.

Therefore this whole life is nothing else than a spiritual baptism which does not cease till death, and he who is baptized is condemned to die. It is as if the priest, when he baptizes, were to say, “Lo, you are sinful flesh. Therefore I drown you in God’s name and in his name condemn you to death, so that with you all your sins may die and be destroyed.” Wherefore St. Paul, in Romans 6 says, “We were buried with Christ by baptism into death.” The sooner a person dies after baptism, the sooner is his baptism completed. For sin never ceases entirely while the body lives, which is so wholly conceived in sin that sin is its very nature, as the prophet says [Ps. 51:5], “Behold I was conceived in sin, and in iniquity did my mother bear me.” There is no help for the sinful nature unless it dies and is destroyed with all its sin. Therefore the life of a Christian, from baptism to the grave, is nothing else than the beginning of a blessed death. For at the Last Day God will make him altogether new.

...then shall we arise from death, from sins, and from all evil, pure in body and soul, and then shall we live eternally. Then shall we be truly lifted up out of baptism and be completely born, and we shall put on the true baptismal garment of immortal life in heaven....”

- Luther here emphasizes the complete death of the “old person” in Baptism. At the same time, he is acknowledging the ongoing power of sin and temptation in the baptized believer’s life, assaulting us as long as we are breathing. All of a believer’s life, therefore, according to Luther, becomes a process, begun in baptism, of dying to sin until the journey is complete at death. What does this mean to you, when you think of the sufferings, heartbreaks, struggles and diseases we all undergo in this life before we die? How does Baptism put our inevitable worldly decline and death in a new perspective?

- Look back on your own life and try to identify times when you were suffering, and the suffering seemed meaningless at the time. Describe the situation, below.
- How does (or might) Baptism, as the lifelong process of “dying to sin” as Luther paints it, cast a different light on the situation you described above?
- Have you ever known a non-believer who has undergone great suffering and pain in life? If so, how do you think they coped (or did not cope) with the situation? Where did they find hope or meaning in their suffering (or in their loved one’s suffering), if they found any? From your experience, to what things are people in today’s world turning for a sense of meaning, purpose, and hope in the face of suffering and death?
- In the space below, summarize in your own words what you think Luther is saying about Baptism in the above passage.

4. In the spirit of going deeper with Christ, write a letter of love and appreciation to the person who is closest to you in this life. If you are married, this would probably be your spouse; if not, think of the person with whom you live and interact on the most constant basis. In coming weeks, we will do this for a parent, and also our children (if we have any), so direct this one towards your spouse or the person who is closest to being a spouse to you. Make this letter more than a card! If this relationship is under stress at this time, think of this as an opportunity to simply build your loved one up with words of healing and hope. Here are two suggestions for ways to approach this challenge:

- 15 things I love about you...
- Things you do every day that I appreciate...
- Things I admire about you...

Messages to avoid:

- I am hoping we can change (meaning I’m hoping you can change)...
- I wish we could do more ___ together (meaning I wish you could make me happier)...
- I am so proud that you are trying harder (meaning you still aren’t living up to me)...

In short, just express full and honest appreciation for your loved one without any hint of criticism. Plan to write this letter and deliver it this week!

5. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

DEEPER WATER IN OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

WEEK #5 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: August 18-24

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for all your gifts to us. Help us each day to grow more fully into the image of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When we stumble and make mistakes, lift us up and fill us with a sense of your forgiveness. When our hearts are cold and we are filled with frustrations, give us your peace. Keep us focused on you in all that we do. In Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Go back to your homework for last week, starting on page 23. As a group, discuss your responses to **items 2-4**. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number 4, below.
4. Have someone read the following: *"In last weeks' homework, we were encouraged to write a letter of love and appreciation to our spouse, or to the person with whom we interact on the most intimate basis from day to day. How are we doing with this deeper water challenge?"*
5. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
6. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be "doubling up" on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
7. Close with prayer. Today, have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (6TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate, with few distractions. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish:

Lord, please give me your wisdom now as I approach your word. Help me to discern your will for me, and open my heart to hear your voice speaking to me through the scriptures. Help me not rely on my own understanding. Thank you God for the clarity, encouragement and hope your Word brings. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

2. For the next two sessions, we will be studying some helpful material from *Baptized, we Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life*, by Daniel Erlander. Please read the following:

The central visual symbol in almost every Lutheran worship room is the cross, the cruel instrument of torture and death which the Roman Empire reserved for rebellious slaves, violent criminals and threatening political subversives.

This symbol is central because we confess, 'It is here, on the cross, that God meets us.' Here God makes himself present...

- *hidden in weakness*
- *vulnerable*
- *suffering*
- *forsaken*
- *dying*

3. As Erlander describes it above, the cross is the place where the Almighty God who created the universe meets each of us most fully in this world. What makes this idea so difficult for the world to receive? Why does it go against pretty much everything the world normally reaches for and hopes for in its religions and worldly strivings?

4. Perhaps the hardest thing about God meeting us most fully on the cross of Jesus is that it makes us face the truth about ourselves. What are some truths the cross makes us face about our own existence?

5. Please continue reading from *Baptized, We Live*:

In the abyss of despair, in the deepest darkness, God comes. In the painful reality of our mortality, our ultimate loneliness, our weakness, God encounters us. As we view the cross all of our human attempts to find him are exposed as illusions. We do not find God by...

- *proving his existence by the power of nature or the power of logic.*
- *validating his presence by visible blessings.*
- *having a prescribed religious experience.*

- *earning divine love by our good works.*
- *building glorious religious institutions.*
- *reaching a high level of personal morality.*
- *saving ourselves through status, wealth, knowledge, consumption, chemicals, positive thinking, correct religious doctrine, self-help groups, health foods or exercise plans.*

We do not find God. God finds us—in our darkness, our pain, our emptiness, our loneliness, our weakness.

This cross-centered understanding does not deny God’s presence in our joyful, happy moments. Of course he’s there. He’s everywhere! Also, this understanding does not say we must be emotionally depressed to be found by God. Rather, God meets us most profoundly at the point of our deepest reality—our honest confrontation with weakness, pain, solitude and death.

6. In all of the religious activity listed in the above bullet list, notice that the movement flows from human beings towards God (proving, validating, earning, building, reaching, saving, etc.). A cross-centered (Lutheran) theology, however, builds itself on God’s movement towards us. Below, please go over the same bullet list, and try to identify specific situations you’ve seen where people might have been trying to “find God” through these human-centered means. Write a few key words by the items that stand out for you, to remind you of particular times you’ve seen people attempting to reach God and hold onto him through these activities:

- proving his existence by the power of nature or the power of logic.
- validating his presence by visible blessings.
- having a prescribed religious experience.
- earning divine love by our good works.
- building glorious religious institutions.
- reaching a high level of personal morality.
- saving ourselves through status, wealth, knowledge, consumption, chemicals, positive thinking, correct religious doctrine, self-help groups, health foods or exercise plans.

7. Please continue reading...

As God meets us where we are, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see...

v *The Cross is God’s Embrace*

God enters our darkness and embraces us with total and unconditional acceptance. Identifying completely with the pain and sorrow of our existence, God woos us into a love relationship with himself.

v *The Cross is God's Victory*

God enters our darkness and exposes and defeats the powers that reign in this world. By the death of Jesus, God liberates us from any person, thing, system or "ism" which would enslave us by demanding absolute loyalty. We are free! Free to let God be God. Free to be human.

We see! We celebrate! The Creator of the universe is a risking, prodigal, extravagant, passionate, merciful God who enfleshed himself in Jesus. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see and to understand the deepest mystery of our faith...

God does not despise flesh. He dwelled in the flesh of Jesus and he dwells in flesh today. The ruler of the universe hides himself in the common, in the stuff of this earth. God lives in creation; He lives in all. Therefore we see God in all.

Note: "Flesh" in this context refers to the human body—bones, muscles, organs, etc. and, in a wider sense, the material world. The goodness of matter is affirmed in Genesis 1 and, above all, in the birth of Jesus as God in flesh. When Paul talks about "flesh" in Romans 8, he is not talking about matter but a will that is directed away from God. We need to understand the difference between these two different uses of "flesh" in order to avoid the unbiblical idea that matter is evil. Luther loved the Christmas story. In animals, shepherds, a manger, a peasant couple and in a human birth he saw a beautiful picture of the way God comes—hidden in flesh, in weakness and in poverty.

8. Here Erlander has moved from talking about how God meets us at the point of our deepest vulnerability (death—the cross) to talking about how God does not despise human flesh or the physical world. The two ideas go together: God meets us on the cross because God loves us and everything about us (but not the destructive powers that hold us captive). He created us to be physical beings in the material world. He himself becomes a physical, material human being in Christ, ultimately in order to dwell with us forever in the flesh. The material world is good. Even though this universe is broken by sin and will pass away, it will be replaced by a world that is every bit as physical. God uses physical means to reach us. In next week's materials, Erlander will talk about the sacrament of **Baptism**, where God uses water (a worldly material) in a special way to convey his Word of life to us.

In the space below, please respond to some of the material Erlander presented above:

- God meets us in Christ with an unconditional embrace in order to "woo" us into a relationship with him. What does this tell us about God—the fact that he wants us to come to him willingly? That he does not want to force us into a mold, or into a position of subservience?

- How does the death of Jesus for our sake “expose the powers that reign in this world” for what they are?
- How do you understand Erlander’s statement that in Christ’s crucifixion and victory over all the other powers of this world that demand our absolute loyalty, God “sets us free... free to let God be God. Free to be human?”
- Erlander affirms that God “hides himself in the common, in the stuff of this earth.” This does not at all mean that God dissolves into what he has made, but rather that God is working through everyday, humble, visible, historical, created means to convey his character and will to us. Many people (including most other religions) refuse to understand God as being involved in everyday life and history. Why do you think people so often try to keep God separated from flesh, and history, and time, and everyday stuff? There are many possible reasons...
- What can the Christmas story (Luke 2:1-20) tell us about God’s willingness to use humble, physical means to convey his saving power? (This question leads us to a deeper understanding and appreciation of God’s gift of the sacrament of Baptism).

9. If you have not yet written a letter to your spouse (or to the closest person to you), please plan to get it done this week.

10. For the next challenge to go deeper, write a letter of love and appreciation to one or both of your parents. Though this idea might seem odd to you at first, you are encouraged to write a letter to your mother or father, *even if he or she has passed away*. ***If your mother or father is still living, follow the same guidelines we set for the letter to our spouse/significant other: say only uplifting, appreciative stuff.*** But if your father or mother has passed away, feel free to include statements of regret, e.g. “I wish we could have....” etc. You may think this sounds odd right now, but writing a letter to your parent(s) who have passed away can bring surprising blessings.

11. Look back at your partners’ prayer concerns from your last meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John’s as we follow Jesus’ call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective “fishers of people.”

Into the Deep Water with Christ
DEEPER WATER IN OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

WEEK #6 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: August 25-31

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
We gather together to learn, to grow and to change. Help us to move into a deeper understanding of your truth. We lay our lives down before you and ask that you would move among us. May we all feel safe with each other. Safe to think and question. Safe to ask for help. And safe to share our lives with you, our loving heavenly Father. In Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on page 27. With your small group, discuss your responses to **items 2-8**. After you finish your discussion, come back here and continue with #4, below.
4. Openly discuss how each of you, in your group, is doing with the two deeper water challenges so far: writing letters to 1) your spouse or significant other, and 2) your parent(s).
5. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
6. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
7. Close with prayer. Today, have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (7TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish:
Loving Father, I will lean in, retreat from the pressures I face, and move closer and deeper into your love. I will breathe out, refrain from the distractions I seek, and become open and receptive to your grace. Help me, Lord, to be honest and real in your presence. Help me to listen, and to be fed with your life-giving Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2. This week we continue using material from *Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life*, by Daniel Erlander. Please read the following:

Here is God...

<i>In the home</i>	<i>in violence</i>	<i>in the prison</i>	<i>in the broken home</i>
<i>In the forest</i>	<i>in the factory</i>	<i>in the sunshine</i>	<i>in the air</i>
<i>In the face of a child</i>	<i>in the culture</i>	<i>in the hospital</i>	<i>in the reservation</i>
<i>In the sunset</i>	<i>in the poor</i>	<i>in the rain</i>	<i>in the office</i>
<i>In worn hands</i>	<i>in the sea</i>	<i>in commerce</i>	<i>in the stranger</i>
<i>In the ghetto</i>	<i>in sharing of food</i>	<i>in government</i>	<i>in sexuality</i>
<i>In human love</i>	<i>in the dance</i>	<i>in the aged</i>	<i>in the church</i>
<i>In the enemy</i>	<i>in the plains</i>	<i>in vocation</i>	<i>in the newspaper</i>
<i>In the mountains</i>	<i>in the cancer ward</i>	<i>in the dying</i>	<i>in outer space</i>
<i>In the suburb</i>	<i>in the synagogue</i>	<i>in the lab</i>	<i>in the temple</i>
<i>In solitude</i>	<i>in the revolution</i>	<i>in extreme pain</i>	<i>in the monastery</i>
<i>In the Super Bowl</i>	<i>in the opera</i>	<i>in death row</i>	<i>in the third world</i>
<i>In marriage</i>	<i>in the corporation</i>	<i>in daily food</i>	<i>in death</i>

NOTE: The presence of pain, violence and evil in the above list does not lead us to conclude that God causes evil. Rather, we believe God is present IN the evil, suffering WITH his creation.

3. As Erlander notes, the fact that we say that God is “in” negative things like violence and suffering is not to say he willingly causes evil and destruction. Through Jesus Christ, we see that God is deeply involved and active in everything that is happening in this world, and that he is working to bring a new life, new love, healing, redemption, and a new creation out of the darkest pits. In the Creeds, for example, we confess that Jesus “descended into hell.” This is to say that *there is no place in creation where Jesus has not been, and where he cannot bring salvation and new life*. Looking at the above list of places where God lives, pick out two or three of the negative examples (e.g. “in the dying”) where you have seen God at work in your own experience. In the space below, write about what you have seen God doing.

4. Please continue reading...

Yes! Because of Jesus, we see God in all—weeping where there is pain and alienation, rejoicing where there is wholeness and love. Also, because of Jesus we know that God chooses specific parts of his creation where he makes himself known as a God who loves and forgives—who means us well. These special parts of creation are called SACRAMENTS.

NOTE: Lutherans say Christ is present in the Sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion) because he is present in all creation. In his argument with Zwingli, Luther said Christ was in the bread at Holy Communion because Christ was present in Luther’s cabbage soup. What makes

the sacraments unique is THE PROMISE OF GOD connected to the physical element and the human action—washing, eating, drinking.

5. Above, Erlander helpfully notes that Lutheran Christians see God active in everything (including cabbage soup). The sacraments of Baptism and Communion—where God uses physical elements (Water, Bread, Wine) to convey Jesus Christ to us, do not mean that God is ONLY working through these two “channels” in the world (as if the rest of the world is empty of God). Rather, they are unique and stand apart from all other parts of God’s creation because:

- Jesus commanded us to use them.
- God promises that he is actively working in the sacraments, to give us forgiveness, life and salvation *through Christ*.

To expand on how the sacraments (Baptism and Communion) are unique gifts from God, given to uphold us and strengthen us in our faith, please read the following excerpt from Luther’s *Large Catechism*:

“When the Word is joined to the element or natural substance, it becomes a Sacrament, that is, a holy and divine matter and sign.

Therefore we always teach that the Sacraments and all external things which God ordains and institutes should not be regarded according to the coarse, external mask (as we regard the shell of a nut), but as that in which the Word of God is enclosed. In the same way we speak about the parental estate and civil government. If we regard these people with reference to their noses, eyes, skin, and hair flesh and bones, they look like Turks and heathens. Someone might come and say: Why should I think more of this person than of others? But because the commandment is added: “You shall honor father and mother,” I see another man, adorned and clothed with the majesty and glory of God. The commandment, I say, is the golden chain about his neck, yes, the crown on his head, which shows me how and why I should honor this particular flesh and blood.

In the same manner, and even much more, you should honor and exalt Baptism on account of the Word, since God himself has honored it by words and deeds and has confirmed it by wonders from heaven. Do you think it was a jest that the heavens opened when Christ allowed himself to be baptized, that the Holy Spirit descended visibly, and that the divine glory and majesty were manifested everywhere?

I therefore admonish you again that these two, the Word and the water, must by no means be separated from each other. For where the Word is separated from the water, the water is no different from that which the maid cooks with and could indeed be called a bathkeeper’s baptism. But when the Word is present according to God’s ordinance, Baptism is a sacrament, and it is called Christ’s Baptism. This is the first point to be emphasized: the nature and dignity of this holy sacrament.

In the second place...we must also learn for what purpose it was instituted, that is, what benefits, gifts, and effects it brings. Nor can we understand this better than from the words of Christ quoted above, “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). To put it most simply, the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save. No one is baptized in order to become a prince, but as the words say, to “be saved.” To be saved, we know, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil and to enter into the kingdom of Christ and live with him forever.

Here you see against how precious and important a thing Baptism should be regarded as being, for in it we obtain such an inexpressible treasure. This shows that it is not simple, ordinary water, for ordinary water could not have such an effect. But the Word has. It shows also...that God’s name is in it. And where God’s name is, there must also be life and salvation. Hence it is well described as a divine, blessed, fruitful, and gracious water, for through the Word Baptism receives the power to become the “washing of regeneration,” as St. Paul calls it in Titus 3:5.

Our know-it-alls, the new spirits [Zwinglians or Anabaptists against whom Luther argued], assert that faith alone saves and that works and external things contribute nothing to this end. We answer: it is true, nothing that is in us does it but faith, as we shall hear later on. But these leaders of the blind are unwilling to see that faith must have something to believe—something to which it may cling and upon which it may stand. Thus faith clings to the water and believes it to be Baptism in which there is sheer salvation and life, not through the water...but through its incorporation with God’s Word and ordinance and the joining of his name to it. When I believe this, what else is it but believing in God as the one who has implanted his Word in this external ordinance and offered it to us so that we may grasp the treasure it contains?

Now, these people are so foolish as to separate faith from the object to which faith is attached and bound on the ground that the object is something external. Yes, it must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart, just as the entire Gospel is an external, oral proclamation. In short, whatever God effects in us he does through such external ordinances.”

In the above passage, Luther presents the sacraments as visible, physical, external means through which God’s Word comes to us. The gospel of Jesus always comes to us from outside ourselves as a living, dynamic proclamation (“Faith comes through what is heard.” Romans 10:17) The sacraments are simply special ways (beautiful gifts) through which God adorns the oral proclamation of Jesus through appealing to our senses of touch, taste, sight, and smell. “Yes, it must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart.” God loves to speak to every part of our human-ness, through all our senses!

6. With the above ideas in mind, please respond to the following:

- Think of a time when your parents—or someone else who loved you dearly—gave you a hug after having a heart-to-heart talk with you. The sacraments are often compared to

that kind of hug. Why are hugs from loved ones even more powerful than words in some situations?

- Think of how you feel, and of where your mind goes, when you come to the altar to receive communion. As best you can with such a mystery, describe how the presence of the physical element in the sacrament (bread/wine) makes the experience unique and especially powerful.
- Why is the fact and the knowledge that you were baptized with water and the Word on a particular date in the presence of your parents, sponsors, and church family (even if you don't remember it yourself) such a special gift from God? Why is it a powerful thing—, *precisely because* it involved a physical element, took place on a specific date in your life, and you did not have a hand in it?
- In the above passage from Luther, he refers to ultra-protestant groups who criticized (and who still criticize) Lutherans for not going far enough to get rid of what they thought of as Roman Catholic ideas concerning Baptism. They say that our view of Baptism is too “magical,” as if we think the water in the basin has an effect apart from God’s Word and our faith, which receives the Word. Luther effectively answers this criticism when he explains that the physical elements in the sacraments are blessed vessels in which the external Word is wrapped, coming to us from outside ourselves, assuring us of God’s saving action in our lives, apart from anything we can say or do. Based on everything that has been said so far, what do you think are the dangers in the ultra-protestant view which always wants to spiritualize faith, separating it from the external world, making it into something that exists only inside of us? What is the danger in always separating God’s Word from the worldly vessels in which it comes to us, like the ultra-protestants do?

7. Please continue reading...

IN BAPTISM...

Water flows over an infant, over a child, over an adult. Through water God touches a weak and vulnerable crown of creation and says YES!

v You are incorporated into Christ and into his body, the church.

v You are initiated, adopted into my covenant people.

v You are called! Chosen! Saved! Born again!

v You are forgiven—free to live without excuses.

- v *You are ordained, set aside to be a minister.*
- v *You are marked with the cross of Christ forever.*
- v *You are given the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

In the baptismal water we died with Christ. We were crucified and buried in order that we might be raised with Christ to live the new life, to dwell in a new reality, a new order of existence.

Because of baptism we are Christians. Never does our status depend on...

- *How we feel.*
- *Having the right experience.*
- *Being free of doubts.*
- *What we accomplish.*
- *Our success or our position.*

8. Respond to the material you just read:

- Have you ever experienced any church-related situation or Christian people who made you feel as if your status as a “real” Christian depended on any of the following:
 - How you feel
 - Having the right experience
 - Being free of doubts
 - What you have accomplished
 - Your success or position in life

If so, please describe the experience(s) below. Then, describe in your own words how our Lutheran emphasis on *God’s action* on our behalf in Baptism puts these types of experiences in perspective.

- Why do you think people throughout the ages have tended to want to define the word “Christian” in terms of the way people act, talk, look, worship, vote, etc. instead of in terms of Baptism?

9. Please continue reading...

We are Christians because God surprised us. Coming in water, God washed us and grafted us into Christ. Our identity for all the days of our life is set! We are children of God, priests of the King, disciples of Christ, a servant people, a holy nation, the communion of saints, the followers

of the Way, proclaimers of the wonderful deeds of God. Jesus' story becomes our story. Baptized into his death, we are raised to live as the Body of Christ in the world today.

NOTE: Many Lutherans were raised with an understanding of Baptism as only a preparation for death, an assurance of heaven in the afterlife. Notice that the NEW TESTAMENT understanding of Baptism presented here teaches Baptism as a beginning of a way of life to be lived in the world.

The Lutheran understanding of Baptism is RADICAL: i.e., Baptism claims a person for a life of total obedience to Jesus Christ. This claim of Baptism is often lost by the misuse of the sacrament—for example, having a baby baptized only because of family tradition or only as a naming ceremony. An understanding of the radical nature of Baptism is being recovered by 1) emphasis on pre-Baptism instruction, 2) including teaching about Baptism in preaching and in educational ministry and 3) inviting persons to renew their Baptism in daily prayer and in renewal ceremonies at times such as Easter Eve.

10. Erlander notes, above, that the radical claim of Baptism is “often lost by the misuse of the sacrament—for example, having a baby baptized only because of family tradition or only as a naming ceremony.” Have you ever suspected or seen Baptism being misunderstood and misused in this way? If so, please describe the situation and your personal feelings/thoughts/response to it.

11. In your own words, how do you understand the New Testament’s view of Baptism as “the beginning of a way of life to be lived in the world” rather than as a “preparation for death?”

12. If you have not yet written letters to your spouse (or significant other) or parent(s), please try to do it this week.

13. For this week, add one more letter: to your children, if you have them. Again, follow the guidelines we set with the first letter: only positive, affirming messages.

14. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other prayers, ask for God’s continued guidance and blessing on your small group and on our congregation as we continue into deeper water with Christ. May the Holy Spirit fill us with life and power so that we can become more confident and effective “fishers of people.”

**Into the Deep Water with Christ
DEEPER WATER IN OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY**

WEEK #7 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: September 1-7

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, holy is your word. Perfect are your ways. Bless us as we meditate on your Word today. Help us to hand all our anxieties, worries, fears and frustrations over to you, and fill us with the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding. Bless our congregation and make us faithful in our witness to Jesus. Be with all those who need your healing power. In Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Go back to the homework you did last week, starting on page 31. With your small group partners, discuss your responses to **items 2-11**. When you are finished, return here and continue with item #4, below.
4. How are you all doing with your three letters: spouse (significant other); parent(s); child(ren)?
5. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
6. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
7. Close with prayer. Today, have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (8TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish:
*Holy Spirit, lift me up from the pit of my sin and selfishness and fill me with your life-giving power. Unite me with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and guide me in the way of truth as I seek your will for my life. Lord God, make me your faithful representative, and help me to pour myself out joyfully in service to your Kingdom. In Jesus' name I pray.
 Amen*
2. For the next two weeks we will be making further connections between Baptism and Spiritual Warfare. Much of what we have read and studied so far makes it clear that Baptism is not meant

to be an “insurance policy” for when we die, but rather the beginning of a new way of life, rooted in the victory of Christ. If we think of baptism as a religious insurance policy, we tend to forget about it while we go about our daily personal business. If we are not thinking of our Baptism a lot, it might be a sign that we are putting too much faith in ourselves, or that we have become complacent in our Christianity. When we see Baptism rightly, we think of it often, because the solid fact of our Baptism is the key reminder from God of our radically new personal identity in Jesus Christ: “You are my beloved son/daughter, with whom I am well pleased.” Baptism is the moment in time where each one of us is joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus, without our having any part in the operation except faith. Just knowing our new identity spurs us to fight a much deeper battle in life than what would be the case if we believed we were just here to make some money and then die.

The way we fight our daily battles in life is not just determined by our smarts, our wisdom, our personal strength, our gifts, or our capabilities. On a much deeper level, the way we fight our battles flows out of our basic identity—our sense of who we are and who we belong to and what our ultimate purpose in life is. As believers in Jesus, our identity is wrapped up completely in Jesus, who has graciously given his perfect human identity to us. Now we can live into the image of God in which we were created. We can continually return to the promise that God has given us in Baptism as our starting point each day, as we face the ongoing challenges of this world. Faith in God’s promise to us in Jesus Christ is the key to waging our spiritual warfare with the sin and evil that continue to attack us in this life, from within ourselves and from without. This week we will devote time to how Baptism equips us to wage our spiritual warfare.

3. Please read **Hebrews 10:19-39**, and then respond to the following:

- This particular passage does not overtly refer to Baptism, but it certainly helps us think about the ongoing spiritual warfare to which God calls his people. According to verses 19-23, with what basic attitude can we live our lives towards God, and on what basis can we have this attitude?

The message of Baptism can sometimes come across as two-sided (and therefore difficult to express with cut-and-dry concepts), because 1) It is telling us the Kingdom of God has been given to us now through Jesus while at the same time telling us 2) We still have a ways to go in this world, and that, because of the continuing power of Satan, we can still be in danger of losing what we have been given. This passage from Hebrews contains this tension.

- In your own words, how do you understand the tension between the “*now* and *not yet*” of the Christian proclamation of the Kingdom of God? In other words, how do you understand yourself as *already winning the war* as a believer, but also that you still have to *fight many battles* before you reach the fullness of the kingdom? How do you understand the role of FAITH in the middle of this tension between the *now* and the *not yet* of God’s kingdom? It is good to express this in your own words.

- In verses 23-25, when Paul encourages us to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful,” he immediately follows up with “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” How do you understand the direct relationship Paul is making between “holding fast to the confession” and the importance of meeting together regularly as the Church?
- Verses 26-31 are disturbing, but the ideas are not unique to Hebrews in the New Testament. Using your own words, write down your understanding of what Paul is saying here about the possibility of “spurning the Son of God” and facing the possibility that there is “no longer a sacrifice for sins” for us.
- In verses 34-39, Paul encourages them to recall earlier times when they had suffered through a lot of trials with cheerfulness and confidence, because they knew that they themselves “possessed something better and more lasting.” How can we relate this idea to what we have been saying about the promise God makes to us in Baptism, and our use of Baptism as a spiritual weapon?
- The author says “But we are not among those who shrink back and are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.” In your own words, describe how “shrinking back” from challenges (a fear reaction) is a sign of being ruled by something other than the God who loves you and who gave his life for you.
- Can you identify a specific situation in your life where you “shrank back” from a situation out of fear? How did the situation resolve (or not resolve?), or how did you overcome your fear?
- How can faith be thought of as the opposite of “shrinking back” from challenges? (In multiple other places, Paul characterizes Christian life as moving forward with confidence to meet the future.) How does our baptism into Christ free us to move forward in life?

4. Please read the following excerpt from *The Holy Sacrament of Baptism*, by Martin Luther, and respond to the questions which follow:

“For this reason no one should be terrified if he feels evil lust or love, nor should he despair even if he falls. Rather he should remember his baptism, and comfort himself joyfully with the fact that God has there pledged himself to slay his sin for him and not to count it a cause for condemnation, if only he does not say Yes to sin or remain in it. Moreover these wild thoughts and appetites, and even a fall into sin, should not be regarded as an occasion for despair. Regard them rather as an admonition from God that we should remember our baptism and the promise God gave us there, that we should call upon God’s mercy and exercise ourselves in striving against sin, that we should even welcome death in order that we may be rid of sin.”

- With what Luther says in mind, can you think of a time in your life when you said “Yes” to sin and remained in it? Describe the circumstances and situation below. Where would you say you are now, in relation to the situation you’ve identified? How do you think God’s baptismal promises speak to the situation?
- Baptism reminds us that God has given us final, complete victory in life through Jesus Christ. How do you understand it as something that can free someone to take action to get the help they need? Have you ever been in a situation where you realized that it is a sign of true strength to reach out for help? If so, describe the situation, below.
- What would you identify as *the* issue in your life right now that is causing you the most trouble, anxiety, and worry? It can be a sickness, a family situation, an addiction, a secret part of your life, a dynamic at your workplace, tension in a love relationship, etc. In the space below, describe the issue. When you discuss this material with your small group partner(s), don’t feel compelled to go into details. Be as general as you wish when sharing this kind of stuff with your partner(s). What about the situation causes you the greatest fear? What is at stake in the situation?
- Identify a few factors related to the particular issue you described above, over which you have *no control*. Then identify other factors in the situation over which you *probably can* exercise *some measure* of positive, healthy control. What uncontrollable factors in the situation do you think you should give to God (casting yourself upon his mercy)? On the other hand, what do you think you *could do* to make the situation better (e.g. reach out for help, confront a person with love, express your concerns openly, etc)? What fears would you need to confront first, before taking positive action? How might your baptism help you wage spiritual warfare against the enemy and confront these fears?

5. If you have not written letters to your 1) Spouse (or significant other), 2) Your parent(s), 3) Your child(ren) yet, please plan to do so this week,
6. For this week's *going deeper* challenge, introduce yourself to someone at church whom you have never met before.
7. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other prayers, ask for God's continued guidance and blessing on your small group and on our congregation as we continue into deeper water with Christ. May the Holy Spirit fill us with life and power so that we can become more confident and effective "fishers of people."

Into the Deep Water with Christ
DEEPER WATER IN OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

WEEK #8 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: September 8-14

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
Lord, you have called us to serve you. Grant that we may walk in your presence: your love in our hearts, your truth in our minds, your strength in our wills; until, at the end of our journey, we know the joy of our homecoming and the welcome of your embrace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
3. Go back to the homework you did last week, starting on page 38. With your small group partners, discuss your responses to **items 2-4**. When you finish, return here and continue with item #4, below.
4. How are you all doing with your three letters?
5. Have you introduced yourself to a new person at church yet?
6. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.

7. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
8. Close with prayer. Have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (9TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate without too many interruptions. Say the following prayer aloud; always feel free to add spontaneous petitions depending on what’s going on in your life today.

Heavenly Father, make me an instrument of your will. Forgive me of my sins and rid me of every fear that keeps me from serving you. Take away my selfishness, my tendency to dwell on past hurts and slights, my anger and frustrations. Help me to let go of the past and to move on to what you would have me do this day, to glorify you and serve the people around me. Give me joy in my work and give me confidence in your love for me. I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

2. This week we will pick up where we left off last week, thinking about Baptism as the springboard from which we wage *spiritual warfare* against the powers that seek to own us in this life. Please continue reading from Luther...

“So you understand how in baptism a person becomes guiltless, pure, and sinless, while at the same time continuing full of evil inclinations. He can be called pure only in the sense that he has started to become pure and has a sign and covenant of this purity and is ever to become more pure. Because of this God will not count against him his former impurity. A person is thus pure by the gracious imputation of God, rather than by virtue of his own nature. As the prophet says in Psalm 32, “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven; blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity.”

Faith is of all things the most necessary, for it is the ground of all comfort. He who does not possess such faith must despair of his sins. For the sin which remains after baptism makes it impossible for any good works to be pure before God. For this reason we must boldly and without fear hold fast to our baptism, and set it high against all sins and terrors of conscience. We must humbly admit, “I know full well that I cannot do a single thing that is pure. But I am baptized, and through my baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound himself in a covenant with me. He will not count my sin against me, but will slay it and blot it out.”

So, then, we understand that the innocence which is ours by baptism is so called only because of the mercy of God. For he has begun this work in us, he bears patiently with our sin, and he regards us as if we were sinless....

Therefore those people err greatly who think that through baptism they have become wholly pure. They go about in their ignorance and do not slay their sin. Indeed they do not admit that it is sin. They simply persist in it, and so make their baptism of no effect. They continue to depend only on a few external works. Meanwhile pride, hatred, and other evils in their nature, which they disregard, grow worse and worse.

How contrary this is! Sin, evil inclination, must be recognized as truly sin. That it does not harm us is to be ascribed to the grace of God. He will not count it against us if only we strive against it in many trials, works, and sufferings, and slay it at last at death. To them who do this not, God will not forgive their sins, because they do not live according to their baptism and covenant, and they hinder the work of God and of their baptism which has been begun.

Those who presume to blot out and put away their sin by “satisfaction” are the same sort of people. They go so far as to disregard their baptism, as though they had no more need of it after they had once been baptized. They do not know that it is in force all through life, even until death, nay, even at the Last Day, as was said above. For this reason they presume to find some other way of blotting out sin, namely by works. So for themselves and for all others, they create evil, terrified, and uncertain consciences, and despair at the hour of death. They do not know how they stand with God, thinking that by sin they have lost their baptism and that it profits them no more.”

3. Above, Luther talks about two different ways people misunderstand Baptism (both of which lead to the same end). A) Some regard it as a kind of magic way that God has removed them completely from any ongoing danger from the powers of sin, death, and evil. B) Others, as was described before, regard baptism as a partial cure for sin, as if it only erases sin up to the time of baptism, and then the individual is responsible to take care of all his/her sins that he/she commits afterwards through work.

- What is the danger, according to Luther, of believing that our baptism has removed us *completely* from any danger of backsliding and destruction in this life (basically that our Christian faith means we can't be touched by the devil anymore)?
- In the modern world, it is common for people to downplay or even ridicule any notion that there is a hostile power (sin) that holds human beings in bonds that are too powerful for them to break. The assumption is that there is a fix for everything. How can a denial or underestimation of the power of sin and evil in the world be dangerous in the following areas:
 - Interpersonal relationships (marriage, family, etc.)
 - A nation's political life

- According to Luther, what are the sad characteristics of a life lived thinking that Baptism is only a partial answer to sin (that it only erases sins committed up to the time of Baptism)?
- In your own words, how are both of these misunderstandings of Baptism, above, ways that human beings take their lives into their own hands?

4. Please continue reading from Luther...

“Guard yourself, by all means, against this error. For, as has been said, if anyone has fallen into sin, he should all the more remember his baptism, how God has here a covenant with him to forgive all his sins, if only he has the will to fight against them, even until death. Upon this truth, upon this alliance with God, a man must joyfully dare to rely. Then baptism goes again into force and operation. Then his heart again becomes again peaceful and glad, not in his own works or “satisfaction,” but in God’s mercy, promised him in baptism, a mercy which God will keep forever. This faith a person must hold so firmly that he would cling to it even though everything and all sins attacked him. For he who lets himself be forced away from this faith makes God a liar in his promise in the sacrament of baptism.

It is this faith that the devil attacks most of all. If he overthrows it, he has won the battle. For the sacrament of penance also (of which we have already spoken) has its foundation in this sacrament, since sins are forgiven only to those who are baptized, i.e., to those whose sins God has promised to forgive. The sacrament of penance thus renews and points out again the sacrament of baptism. It is as though the priest, in the absolution, were saying, “Lo, God has now forgiven you your sin, as he long since promised you in baptism; and now he has commanded me, by the power of the keys, to assure you of this forgiveness. Believe, and you have it. Doubt, and you are lost.” So we find that through sin baptism is indeed hindered in its work in the forgiveness and the slaying of sin. But only by unbelief in its operation is baptism brought to nothing. Faith, in turn, removes the hindrance to the operation of baptism. Everything depends on faith.

To speak quite plainly, it is one thing to forgive sins, and another thing to put them away or drive them out. The forgiveness of sins is obtained by faith, even though they are not entirely driven out; but to drive out sins is to exercise ourselves against them, and at last it is to die; for in death sin perishes completely. But both the forgiveness and the driving out of sins are the work of baptism. Thus the Apostle writes to the Hebrews [12:1], who were baptized, and whose sins were forgiven, that they should lay aside the sin which clings to them. As long as I believe that God is willing not to count my sins against me, my baptism is in force and my sins are forgiven, even

though they may still, in a great measure, be present. After that follows the driving out of my sins through sufferings, death, and the like. This is what we confess in the third article of the Creed, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins" and so forth. Here there is special reference to baptism, in which forgiveness takes place through God's covenant with us. Therefore we must not doubt this forgiveness.

It follows, therefore, that baptism makes all sufferings, and especially death, profitable and helpful, since these things can now only serve baptism in the doing of its work, that is, in the slaying of sin. For he who would fulfill the work and purpose of his baptism and be rid of sin, must die. It cannot be otherwise. Sin, however, does not like to die, and for this reason it makes death so bitter and so horrible. Such is the grace and power of God that sin, which has brought death, is driven out again by its own work, name, by death itself."

5. Above, Luther reconnected *penance* to Baptism. In medieval Catholic theology, penance was taught as the way by which people worked off the debt of their sins through various religious exercises (prayer, physical labor, spiritual tests, etc.). Luther's (biblical) understanding of penance is very different from the medieval teaching: he depicts it as a lifelong process of *willingly joining ourselves in with God's work* of "slaying" sin in ourselves until we finally die and the work of Baptism is complete. The key difference is that the slaying of sin is God's work, and not ours. Knowing that we will triumph in Jesus, we can stand up and face the enemy with confidence.

We do not slay our sin and do acts of penance (fight our spiritual warfare) in order to pay off our sins, as if we're working out of a personal spiritual bank account in front of God. In the old (medieval) teaching, God occasionally helped people with what you could call "spurts" of grace so that they could save themselves...as long as they did religious stuff to deserve those spurts of grace.

- If we think we are working out of a "personal bank account" of merit in front of God, what, in your own words, are some real-life realities we will have to face sooner or later?
- If we live assuming we've got our own bank account of merit with God, how will this affect our relationship with God himself (think in terms of how often—or seldom—we will look to him for help and comfort).
- In your own words, how does our Lutheran (biblical) understanding that our "balance" with God is always *infinitely negative* change our attitude towards the battles we fight in life? How does it affect our attitude of reliance and dependence upon God?

6. From what we've read from Luther, it is clear that Baptism and the biblical idea of "spiritual warfare" are closely tied together. Jesus was baptized, and then immediately was driven out into the wilderness to engage in battle with the Tempter. Likewise, our baptism into Christ is the starting and ending point of *our* daily spiritual warfare. The struggles we face always drives us back to remembrance of our Baptism, because our daily struggles with sin and temptation—and our failures and stumblings—continually remind us that we are completely hopeless without God's salvation in Jesus.

The concept of Spiritual Warfare is often lost upon Christians today. As modern people with incredible worldly resources at our disposal, we often think of ourselves as encountering a never-ending string of "problems" and "issues," which perpetually keep us from achieving personal fulfillment. Alone in our personal battles against small problems that we try to fix, one after another, the frustration mounts and we have a growing sense that we will never get to the personal ideal retirement heaven we pictured for ourselves. Even at retirement, we find out we keep facing the same string of little problems and issues.

The picture changes for a believer. Through our Baptism into Christ, a new vision of life opens up for us. The heavens open. Now we see the reality: we are weak but beloved creatures of God standing on a battlefield where powers far stronger than we are engaged in a cosmic warfare. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12) As weak and vulnerable creatures, unless we are completely protected and taken into the care of God and told who we are ("You are my child, my beloved..."), we will never see the true extent of the powers that are ranged against us. We will be tossed to and fro on the battlefield, never knowing our ultimate purpose in life (to worship and praise God), never knowing who we belong to, always relying on our own pitiable resources to get where we want to be.

Through our Baptism into Christ, we now see the true Enemy for what he is, and through Jesus we know God for who he is. We understand through Baptism that our fight will be to the death. We are not surprised by the constant troubles, the unending trials, of this life. Our life is no longer about our personal struggles with small problems, one after the other. Instead, Baptism frames our whole life in terms of God's battle on our behalf. This is a battle that, through Jesus, we can now join with confidence. We don't kid ourselves that we can win the fight on our terms, but only through total reliance on God. Baptism reminds us that through Jesus, we have been put back into a right relationship with God, where we turn to him for life and victory. We don't try to be God and fight on our own anymore (a recipe for retreat, "shrinking back," and fear). Instead we face the enemy directly and move forward, knowing that it is not by our own efforts that we will prevail, but only through faith in God.

Spiritual warfare, for Christians, is waged on the front of everyday life. At home, at work, in our marriages, in our vocation as citizens—this is where the cosmic battle between God and Antichrist for the prize of our souls is taking place underneath the surface. With this in mind,

respond to the following material, which is meant to help us clarify and define some of the challenges we're facing in our lives right now in terms of *spiritual warfare*, as described above.

A In the space below, identify some of the hardest, most challenging situations you've faced (or are facing) in the following areas. First, try to express what, specifically, makes you feel most powerless about each situation you identify:

-Your marriage (if you are/have been married), or closest love relationship.

-Your health.

-A friendship.

-Your work life.

-Your social life in general.

-With your parents.

-In church.

-With your family of origin.

-With a child, or your children, if you have any.

B Now think about how the promise of Baptism can speak directly and concretely to the situations you've described above. Use the spaces below to identify how you think your loving Father in heaven is encouraging you to wage confident spiritual warfare against the powers that are seeking to isolate you and hurt you in these areas of your life. For example, would your fight involve A) seeking help? B) having a tough conversation? C) letting go of a need to control things? D) remembering to stop and pray? E) reading a book to educate yourself on a particular topic? F) sharing your problem with a sympathetic friend? G) private confession? Try to identify courses of real *action* that

you can take, while acknowledging the hand of your loving Father and leaving the end of the story in his hands.

-In your marriage (if you are/have been married), or closest love relationship.

-With your health.

-In a friendship.

-In your work life.

-In your social life in general.

-With your parents.

-In church.

-With your family of origin.

-With a child, or your children, if you have any.

7. Have you written your letters of appreciation?

8. Have you introduced yourself to a person at church who you do not know?

9. For this week's going deeper challenge, memorize the following Bible verse:

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

10. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other prayers, ask for God's continued guidance

and blessing on your small group and on our congregation as we continue into deeper water with Christ. May the Holy Spirit fill us with life and power so that we can become more confident and effective “fishers of people.”

Into the Deep Water with Christ
DEEPER WATER IN OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

WEEK #9 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: September 15-21

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
Come Holy Spirit, make God's Word known to us. Make us desire the truth in all that we do and always bring us home to the source of all truth, our Savior Jesus Christ. Open our hearts and minds to your guidance today as we discuss the sacred scriptures and share this time together. Give us joy in our fellowship, and set us free from our fears, that we may welcome others into the peace of your presence with the graciousness with which you have welcomed us into eternal life with you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Go back to the homework you did for this meeting, starting on page 43. With your small group partners, review the material under **items 2-6** and discuss your responses. When you are finished, return here and continue with item #4, below.
4. Have we written our letters of appreciation?
5. Have we introduced ourselves to someone at church whom we do not know?
6. Can any of us recite Galatians 5:1 from memory?
7. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
8. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
9. Close with prayer. Have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMework FOR YOUR NEXT (10TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish.

I praise you, God, for the grace you have shown me: for the gift of life itself, for my family, my friendships, and all the things that I too often take for granted. Most of all, I thank you for sending your Son Jesus into this world and into my life, that I may know you and worship you as my Heavenly Father. Set me free from all the false gods that I am tempted to worship because they offer me easy shortcuts around the cross of Jesus, and lift me up by the Holy Spirit to serve you alone with joy and confidence. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2. The "Affirmation of Baptism" service (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pp. 234-7) identifies **five basic activities** that shape and characterize the life of a person who is actively living out of God's Baptismal promise:

- living among God's faithful people.
- hearing God's Word and sharing in his supper.
- proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.
- serving all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus.
- striving for justice and peace in all the earth.

When a baby is baptized, parents and sponsors (with the promised support of the congregation) promise to raise the child in these practices. Confirmation students (around the age of 13 in most of our congregations) commit themselves, on their own initiative, to continue in these activities for the rest of their lives. Increasingly, Lutheran congregations are using the "Affirmation of Baptism" service as a regular feature in worship to help their members recover the biblical understanding that Baptism is the beginning of a life of faith, service, and striving to do God's will. We want to rid ourselves of the attitude that Baptism is just a stamp of approval or a "fire insurance policy" that is easily forgotten after a baby "gets done."

The five commitments of the Affirmation of Baptism service are challenging. But *our* success or failure in fulfilling them is not what makes us God's children through Jesus Christ. God doesn't give you a free gift and then say you must achieve it. On the contrary, we say "yes" to these five commitments out of total freedom and with joyful confidence. Trusting in our Lord Jesus Christ frees us to follow his example. Below, please think about the five challenges and respond to the questions.

3. ***I commit myself to live among God's faithful people.***

- Think of four people who have helped you to "live among God's faithful people" in a local congregation. Who are they? How have they helped you do it?

- What kinds of relationships have you experienced that have gotten in the way of your relationship with God's people? Try to recall specific circumstances.
- At this point in your life, how do you think you might more consistently and joyfully live among God's faithful people? What specific opportunities do you see that might help you establish closer friendships and relationships within your church family?
- What kind of support or help might you need to establish closer ties to your church family? Can someone in particular help you with obstacles you may be encountering right now in your relationships with others in the church? Would you benefit from talking to a pastor? A staff person? A fellow member? Write down your thoughts on this below, with a mind towards taking action.

4. I commit myself to regularly hear God's Word and share in his supper.

Worship is the core of Christian life. We believe that our final goal in life is to praise God and give him glory. He is the creator of everything, and he is the end of everything. We cannot do more than worship him, or go beyond worshipping him. This is why it is such a mark of our brokenness when believers fall away from worship, or when we stop spending "quality time" with God, devoting our full attention to him (i.e. observing the Sabbath).

Worship is the one place in life where we can truly say we have reached our destination, and that we *are* where we *belong*. Everything we do during the week begins with worship, and everything we achieve in life is to end in worship. Worship is where we acknowledge the miracle: that we are not "trying to get to heaven," but that heaven has come to us today in Jesus Christ.

Worship is also important because through it we hear God actively speaking to us each week. Gathered with the people of God, we receive the gift of his body and blood. Faith is not just about ideas...it is about a living relationship. A God who doesn't speak to us or continually give us the gift of his gospel would just be an idea. We don't just need more ideas. We need to hear him speaking to us; we need to receive his gifts of love. Worship is where we can be sure God will meet us as a living, giving presence. He strengthens our faith through worship and nourishes us through it so that we can live life each day with renewed confidence and courage based on God's baptismal promises to us.

- Below, describe a particularly memorable worship experience. Why did it stand out? What about it made you feel that you were *at your destination* with God, lifted up from death?

- Which of the following is your favorite part of our worship service right now, and why do you think so?
 - a) singing hymns.
 - b) singing "this is the feast of victory for our God."
 - c) confession and forgiveness.
 - d) sermon.
 - e) receiving communion.
 - f) the prayers.
 - g) other....

- Below, identify some factors (habits, schedules, attitudes, etc.) that have historically (or currently) kept you personally from worshipping with God's people regularly. Write down what helps you (or could help you) get over these hurdles and establish a rhythm of regular Sabbath observance.

5. I commit myself to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.

We proclaim who we believe in by what we do and say, and people do watch us. Some of us have an easier time than others talking about our faith, but that does not mean we are not always proclaiming our faith.

The old expression, "actions speak louder than words" is a great one, but for Christians, actions *and* words speak loudly. *Christians must make Jesus an object of conversation somewhere, somehow in their lives.* Without speaking about him, our faith tends to become private. We can and should take the risk of talking about him. A faith proclaimed only by actions ends up being a bunch of "good deeds" in the eyes of others (and in our own). A faith proclaimed by actions *and* words, on the other hand, openly gives God all the credit.

- Place a check-mark next to each term, below, you think you would probably be able to generally explain to another person who has ***no*** knowledge of Christian faith.

-grace	-Holy Spirit	-Trinity	-justification	-sin
-confession	-communion	-forgiveness	-disciple	-saint

-sanctification	-Baptism	-gospel	-sermon	-Bible
-prayer	-faith	-good works	-heaven	-eternal
-creator	-redeemer	-missionary	-minister	-prophet
-judgment	-repentance	-Kingdom of God	-parable	-miracle

- Below, match the items in the left column with items on the right:

1. Body and Blood	a. Jesus' Throne
2. Confession	b. Baptism
3. Trinity	c. Communion
4. Justification	d. The study of God.
5. Theology	e. Absolution
6. Grace	f. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
7. Redemption	g. Free Gift
8. Word	h. Scripture
9. Wrath	i. Judgment
10. Cross	j. Being put right with God
11. Death and Birth	k. Salvation

You have just demonstrated your ability to express the Christian faith verbally. Your Church experience—particularly if you have been involved in Bible studies—has helped you define a number of terms we use as believers more clearly. Some of these terms might seem a little hazy, but there are many resources and activities at church that can help you to make connections between these terms and your life experience. Most importantly, your ability to share your faith with others will grow. Strive to keep learning the language of faith.

- Have you ever participated in a Bible study (apart from the small group you're in right now) before? If not, what factors (social, fear, time, busy-ness, etc.) do you think might be keeping you from participating in more Christian education activities at church? What would you have to do to make growing in biblical knowledge a priority?
- What aspect of the Christian faith would you say you are most curious about right now? What would you like to learn more about?
- From your experience, what are some of the most effective ways for laypeople to share their faith verbally with others today (in loving and non-intimidating ways so that people will connect)?

- What are some challenges that you face, personally, when it comes to sharing your faith verbally with other people? What resources do you think you need that could help you become more comfortable and confident speaking about Jesus with others?
- In this regard (and for a lot of support and training in other areas) check out the **OUTCOME-BASED MINISTRY SKILLS** coaching that Gary and Laurie Pecuch offer to **anyone in our congregation**—adult or youth—who wants to become more confident in their faith and ministry for Jesus. St. John's is truly blessed to have church staff who have years of experience with this practical training. They want to share it with you. Call Pastor Seth (217-255-2118) or the Church office (614.875.2314).

6. I commit myself to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus.

- In what ways do you serve other people through your current vocation(s) (vocation includes parenting, being a grandparent, being a friend, etc.)? How does your work benefit people/society at large?
- What different service projects is our congregation regularly involved in, that you are especially aware of and fond of? How do these activities serve to build people up and promote sharing of God's resources? How does this type of service witness openly to the Lordship of Jesus?
- The idea of Christian service (giving of self in response to Jesus) is always wound up, directly or indirectly, with our attitudes about financial stewardship. What are your current thoughts/feelings towards the biblical principle of tithing (or percentage giving in general)?

7. I commit myself to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

It's easy to feel helpless in the face of the many problems—hunger, violence, greed, racism, poverty and etcetera—which continue to plague our world and our nation. But we must not underestimate the "ripple effect" our actions have on others, as we follow the example of Jesus. We should not downplay the effect that millions of people are having in the world this very day, who are showing the mercy of Christ in their lives towards others. The world would be a much worse place without them. We are called to stand up for, and reach out to, the last, the least and the lost throughout our lives. We can do so without losing heart, knowing that Christ goes with us into every situation.

- What do you think are some of the main causes of injustice and suffering in our world today?
- Where do you think God is when you see human suffering?
- How do you see yourself striving to work for peace and justice in your own life? In your family? Among your future work-partners? In society as a whole?
- How would you like to see our congregation involved in working for peace and justice in the world? What kinds of activities?

8. Have you written your letters of appreciation?

9. Have you introduced yourself to someone in the congregation whom you do not know?

10. Have you memorized Galatians 5:1?

11. For this week's *going deeper* challenge, memorize the following verses:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. -Titus 3:4-7

12. Please think and pray about your next step in going deeper with Christ. Our Back to Shore meeting for this unit will take place on Sunday, October 13th, at 6:30 p.m. The next focus, starting October 20th, will be "*Going Deeper in our Caring Ministry.*" At your next small group meeting, you will be discussing with your partner(s) whether you will continue as a group or reconfigure.

13. Please consider writing a blurb about your experience so far with going deeper with Christ for our church newsletter (the Eagle) and/or our website.

14. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other prayers, ask for God's continued guidance

and blessing on your small group and on our congregation as we continue into deeper water with Christ. May the Holy Spirit fill us with life and power so that we can become more confident and effective “fishers of people.”

Into the Deep Water with Christ
DEEPER WATER IN OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

WEEK #10 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: September 22-28

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
Loving Father, lift our eyes to seek you first today and always. Forgive us for getting bogged down in the cares and worries of this world. Renew us through the power of the Holy Spirit to live confidently as your sons and daughters. Give us strength to build up your Church on earth, to witness to Christ, and to serve the people around us with humility and joy. We pray this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.
3. Go back to the homework you did for this session, starting on page 49. With your small group partner(s), discuss the material and your responses to **items 2-7**. When you are finished, return here and continue with item #4, below.
4. Talk together about your plans for the next chapter of *going deeper with Christ*. Will you be staying together as a group? Reconfiguring? Disbanding for the time being? Be sensitive to each other’s needs and commitments. If you are continuing to the next topic and need to find a new group, please act now! Pastor Seth (217.255.2118) or Pastor Patti (614.875.2314) can help you as needed. You will probably have a good chance finding a new group or other people looking for a group at the upcoming “Go Out from Shore” meeting on October 13th.
5. Our “Come Back to Shore” meeting for this unit (Baptism) will take place at 6:30 p.m. on Sunday, October 13th. The next unit, *Going Deeper in our Caring Ministry*, will begin on Sunday, October 20th. It will be a shorter unit, focusing on how we can be effective Christian caregivers and witnesses to people of all ages who are hurting, sick, broken, near death, grieving, depressed, or anxious. In particular, it will help us understand the grieving process in light of God’s promises. Caring for others effectively challenges us to be in touch with our own brokenness. God will put our weaknesses to use for others. We hope you will participate in the next part of our *Going Deeper* journey!
6. Could any of you (or all of you) write a blurb about your experience for the newsletter and/or website and/or Facebook regarding your journey so far?

7. For your final prayer, have everyone pray in turn. Thank God for your partner(s). Thank him for this opportunity we've been given to share our baptismal faith, and to build each other up in the love of Christ. Ask for God's blessings and guidance for our congregation as we continue together on this journey into the deep water with Christ.