

Blessed are you, Resurrection Lutheran Church, for you are about to receive a wise new member.

Sara Elaine Hunt will be baptized this morning, God's daughter, with whom God is well pleased, and we can learn a thing or two from her, so pay attention.

I'll bet she brought more people to worship today than you did, so maybe study her methods of evangelism, which seem to involve a lot more smiling than talking.

She is also a model disciple.

Later in Matthew's story, when the disciples ask *who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*, Jesus called a child, whom he put among them, and said, *"Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

Perhaps Sara knows what he means by that.

New Testament professor Ray Pickett emphasizes not Jesus' words so much as his action: he puts the child in the center of the disciples, to illustrate concretely what is to be central to their community and concern.

Children, in Jesus' day, weren't even considered people yet.

They were vulnerable, powerless, mostly unprotected by the legal system, an economic liability to be endured rather than a joy to be treasured.

Children were defenseless and dependent, like Sara dangled over the water, or like the desperately poor, whose poverty swallows even their spirit, or like the newly grieving, who are immobilized by shock and heartbreak.

These are the ones, the hurting and the helpless, that Jesus tells his students are the blessed.

These are the people in whom the kingdom of heaven operates, in whom the presence and activity of God can be most readily seen.

Those who want to share in blessedness, then, offer mercy, create peace, pursue righteousness, chase after a world named *the kingdom of heaven* where relationships are right for everyone, where all are respected and treated with deep dignity, where blessings need no longer be spoken because no one is lowly or overlooked, dismissed or desperate.

The ones the world leaves behind are the ones Jesus positions first, and he points his disciples to them in order to point his disciples to the kingdom of heaven.

A different rabbi, according to a Jewish story, said, *In olden days there were men who saw the face of God.*

His disciple asked, *Why don't they anymore?*

Because nowadays, no one stoops so low. (adapted from Brian Stoffregen, notes on *Makarios* at crossmarks.com)

Blessed are you, Resurrection Lutheran Church, for today you have guides to show you the way: the people of Bead for Life whose story we will hear today at coffee hour, and also Sara, our new sister at the center of our community's attention this morning, who in taking the baptismal plunge reminds us again to stoop down toward heaven.

In her incoherent babbling we can hear the wisdom of God; in her helpless flailing we can see hints of blessing; in her smiling reception of grace utterly beyond her control, feeding and rocking and snuggling and the fresh forgiveness that is every clean diaper, we can begin to glimpse how the kingdom of heaven might work, and where.

Blessed are the poor, the mournful, the trampled, the unsatisfied, and those who work on their behalf, for they are the ones with God, the holy One we are blessed to see whenever we dare to look at the cross.

That utter weakness, that profound divine foolishness is what we trace on Sara's forehead,
because we know what's going to happen.

She's going to grow.

She's going to learn to talk, and to run, and to assert her power and independence.

People will stop following her to worship, and she will stop following the wisdom of God that sounds so foolish to her sophisticated ears.

She might care more about designer labels than disenfranchised losers, in which case she will drift away from blessing.

She might grow up in American culture and be poisoned by its lusts for money and power and prestige and personal security.

She might follow her forebears, ancient Israel and present day Illinois and even Mother Church in chasing after far sexier, far more interesting gods than the One who blesses the poor and the pitiful, the One who lives with the lowly and dies alone on a cross.

Sara could be in danger of drifting away from the shadowy edges of life where the light of God shines most brightly.

That is why we ruin her adorable little forehead with the ugliness of Christ's cross, why we trace that hideous shape of surprising hope on her otherwise beautiful face.

Sara, that cross is there to remind you to stoop low and see the face of God.

It will guide you to blessing, if you dare to follow its lead.

It will lead you to those in tatters and tears, those who are swaddled in the center of God's heart.

It will lead you to hunger and thirst and frustration with a world that does not share God's concern or focus, to the difficult and blessed struggle of fighting poverty and providing mercy and doing peace.

The cross on your forehead will weigh you down until you submit to its strange wisdom and stoop low enough to see God.

Keep following it down, down to your brothers in tears and your sisters in trouble, down until, feeble and old and needy and beautiful and blessed and wise, you finally follow it all the way down to your ancestors in the earth...and some minister, mourning over your humble remains, makes the sign of the cross once more and says, *Blessed are you, child of God.*

Receive mercy, rejoice and be glad.

Enter the kingdom of heaven, savor the sight of God.