

DAY OF PENTECOST – CONFIRMATION

May 15, 2016

Romans 8:14-17

"Children of God"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

Today's sermon is by the confirmation class of 2016. It's all in their own words. And I hope that all of us gathered here today will be touched by their words, and take this as an opportunity to examine our own faith and relationship with Christ, just as these young people had to do when they wrote their faith papers.

As I [think of] [look out on] this year's confirmation class I know that each and every member has a vibrant, living faith in Jesus Christ. They know that they are beloved, forgiven children of God.

Let me show you, in their own words, just how alive these young Christians are in their faith. But first, I should share that they sometimes like to rattle my cage just a little. Like this one who writes,

"I can still remember how excited I was to be starting confirmation. ... I wasn't! But, like many things, I am so glad that I did it and I don't know why I wasn't excited. These two years have been full of new experiences, new people, and old people (Pastor Saul).

At least this student goes on to say:

"I've made huge steps in my faith and understanding. I can't wait to see the steps I take in faith throughout the rest of my life."

Another one begins by giving the dictionary definition of faith as:

"a strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof." Then she says,

"To be honest, I can understand why people would not possess this variety of faith, largely due to the second part of the statement. To some people, devoting the time and energy to worship any deity without proof could seem a bit strange, especially one said to bring people back from the dead and walk on water."

Many of them tell why they love God and Jesus:

"I love God because God is there for me whenever I need him no matter what. I have gone through tough times and God has been there for me every single step of the way." Or,

"When you are feeling unloved, all you have to think about is how much God love you. God loves all of his children." Here are some more comments:

"The greatest gift from God besides life is that He always loves you."

"I love God because he loves all of us. He loves us no matter what we do; no matter how we act. But that gives us no reason to not do the right thing or act poorly. God loves us all even those who don't believe in him or even those who try disproving him."

A couple of them talk about Baptism, which is something we emphasize in 9th grade.

“Baptism is very important to me because it is like the death of sin.” And,

“Baptism is important to me because that is when we are forgiven our sins and become reborn. We need to be forgiven because the sad thing is that we are always sinning against God and there is no way that we can not sin against him....”

These young people are incredibly thankful for what Jesus has done and continues to do for them.

“I need a savior to forgive my sins and keep loving me for who I am and what I do every day. Someone who never stops loving me even on my darkest days.” Or,

“My faith in Jesus helps me when I’m stressed out about finals or an honors science test because I know I can talk to God about it and he helps me make it through it all, and even if I don’t do as well as I would have hoped, I can talk to God when I’m down because he’s always there.”

They understand the reality of sin and the need for salvation. Hear what they say:

“It’s hard to get through a day of life without sinning. That’s why I need a savior.” Or,

“I’m not perfect and never will be even close to perfect. I sin every day; not because I want to; just because that’s how life works.”

Some of them have done some deep thinking about the faith, and aren’t afraid to put their thoughts on paper:

This one thinks we’ll be shocked by what she says: *“I have a feeling that all the old church ladies of the world would be appalled at what I’m going to say. I believe that there is some truth in every religion.” (so do I) “I believe in the Big Bang, evolution, etc. (so do I.) In fact, I love science and I think science actually works really well with creation stories. (so do I.) I believe that a lot of stories in the Bible are metaphorical, (Hey! So do I.) and there’s nothing wrong with that.”*

I’m delighted to see that we have young people who aren’t afraid to use their God-given intelligence to wrestle with faith questions and issues related to science and faith.

That’s one of the beauties of our ELCA – **we aren’t afraid to engage these questions.**

In fact, Pastor Jennifer introduces some of these ideas in 8th grade, as one of the students remembers, and writes:

“To me the most important thing I learned in confirmation was in eighth grade when we talked about what science teaches about creation and evolution and what the Bible says about creation. What

was important to me was how Jennifer talked about how we can believe in a combination of both, because it's possible that humans could've evolved as science explains under God's direction."

Way to go, Pr. Jennifer!

And here's another surprising example of deep thinking about the faith:

"If someone asked you, 'who was God?', how would you respond? I would answer that 'God was and is the creator of all things, seen and unseen.' But that question is wrong because it's saying that God is not here anymore. But Jesus is still alive and always will be with us."

The following is a nice story of one student's "aha" moment in the faith:

"I've always believed in God, but at times I doubt God. In Detroit, when we were cleaning up in a neighborhood that was in a rough condition, I just couldn't stop thinking, 'how is God here with these people? People here are barely getting by. How could God let this happen."

That day was probably the time when I most doubted God. But it was also the day when I saw God most clearly. People came together to help clean. A woman offered her bathroom to us sweaty volunteers so we wouldn't have to walk three blocks to the porta-potty, and I saw a group of men sitting by their car, (I'm not gonna lie. I thought they looked sketchy at first) but as we walked by they said, 'thank you so much and God bless you guys.' All of this showed me God's presence. But there was still a little voice in the back of my mind wondering if God was there.

Then, as I was cleaning a burned out house, I looked under some papers and as I picked them up I found a cross. That moment will be with me forever.

That's when the voice in my head said, 'This is God. He is here with us and all these struggling people.' That was my 'aha' moment in my faith."

Many of them shared some of the things they learned in Confirmation:

"As a Christian, God wants me to serve my neighbors and try to obey him. When I say serve my neighbors, I don't mean the people that live in the house next to you. I mean everyone around you."

Another said, "The most important thing I learned in confirmation was how much God loves us. He has that unconditional love for us that no matter what we do, He won't love us any less or any more."

It's exciting to read what this one wrote:

"I've always felt called by God, so that I know when I grow up that it's gonna be about Him in some way. I can feel God calling me to him. It just makes me excited to think I will serve him in the

future. I just feel happy when I think about what I could do with my life and God's word. I'm excited to keep growing in the faith."

I hope all of us can be equally excited to continue to grow in our faith. And I hope we, too, can be happy to think about how God is calling us to serve Him in our daily lives!

Finally, let me share one example of a promise I see every year in these faith papers:

"It is important to me to keep growing in my faith as I get older. That is why after I get confirmed I will continue to attend church."

To this person, and to all of [our] [you] confirmands, I hope and pray that you will stick with this intention to stay connected with this congregation.

Our God has so much more that he wants to say to each of you – so much grace he wants to continue to shower upon you – and the best place for that to happen is here in worship.

Of course, I won't be here next fall to see if you keep your promises. But I'm sure there are spies who will keep me informed!

But seriously, what I especially want to say to our confirmands, and to each of you gathered here this morning is this: **don't ever forget:**

YOU ARE GOD'S BELOVED SONS AND DAUGHTERS.

And remember:

GOD WILL LOVE YOU WITH AN UNCONDITIONAL LOVE EVERY DAY OF YOUR LIFE! Amen.