

Sunday, October 25, 2015 – Reformation & Confirmation Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Jeremiah 31:31-34

New or Not

Katrina, David, Gabriel, & Josh, our 9th grade confirmands, you've been attending Sunday School for years. For the past two years you've been studying with special focus and extra Saturday classes the holy scriptures and the traditions of Lutheran Christian faith. Today you are doing something new: You are standing up for yourself. You are saying: "This is who I am, this is how I will be." Today you are asserting yourself, making a public statement about personal identity. That's something new for a teenager to do, right?

Maybe that's not such a new thing for someone your age to do, to announce who they are and what they want. Though, as teenagers go, I think that you are uncommonly polite, You are not a boisterous bunch. Well, maybe some of you are. All of you are at times, I am sure. I am sure all your parents have stories about times you've asserted yourself. Maybe it was just last week, or maybe when you were about knee high. You have all grown so—you have all grown so tall! Sandra and I had to go through the Confirmation robes to make sure we had ones that were long enough. You have all grown so much, especially these last two years. Still, tall as you are, I know that your parents can remember when you were just a little one and you learned that word that, so beloved by assertive toddlers, "No."

When you were little, your parents also said "No." They said "No" to some things for you, and to you. No doubt they said "No" at many different times and places. They also said it in a sacred way, in a holy place; they said it when they brought you to be baptized. Baptism is a sacrament of the church in which we say "no" to things—to sin, death and the devil—that's how Martin Luther put it. When you were baptized, your parents said no to all the forces that defy God. Your parents said no, together with your godparents, and all the people in the congregation who were there that day—some of those same people are here again today! All those people said no to those things. And then they said yes other things, life-giving things. Yes to learning, yes to growing, yes to caring, yes to community, yes to working for justice and peace. Yes to God.

In the Lutheran tradition, when it is an infant or child that is baptized, adults say no and yes for them, on their behalf. Then, when the children grow older, we invite them to say yes to what has already been said: yes to the covenant made when water poured over your head in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, yes to your personal and permanent identity as God's beloved child. Today we invite these four to affirm that. That's why you are sitting in front of everyone, wearing that grown up sized gown, to say yes to your baptism, in front of everyone, yourself. So yes, it's new, what you are doing, what you are saying.

But it's also not new. Your gown is bigger, but it's white, the color of baptismal garb. Maybe you wore a little white gown when you were baptized. And as the baptismal rite continues, with hands placed upon the baptized heads, sometimes they're such tiny heads—so today hands will be laid on your head, and we'll pray for you, as we do at a baptism, for the gifts of the spirit. We pray today that these gifts continue to grow in you, and that those gifts are shown in what you do and what you say. What you do today is new, but it's a new that continues.

God is always working like that: doing a new thing that continues, a new thing that confirms, and expresses, and amplifies, and personalizes what God is already doing. In today's Old Testament reading, God talks about his covenant with the people of Israel—the covenant the will be their God, and they will be his people. The people broke this covenant. Their words and

deeds said no to God. So God gives a new covenant. It's the same covenant of love, but it's written now, not on stone or paper, but on people's hearts. In the New Testament, Jesus gathers his followers together on the night in which he is betrayed, and gives them a new covenant, the sacrament of Holy Communion. This is how they will remember him, and how he lived and what he said. Jesus himself is the new covenant, which is the old covenant, continued. Jesus affirms, embodies, epitomizes God's love for us, a love that has been there since the beginning, since the day we were born. We can say yes to that love, in what we say and in what we do and say. Katrina, David, Gabriel, & Josh are saying yes to it today. We celebrate that!

We celebrate something else today, too. In the Lutheran tradition, it is Reformation Sunday. Today we remember how a Catholic monk, the aforementioned Martin Luther, asserted himself, five hundred years ago. Like our Confirmation students, Luther studied the scriptures and the church traditions, which led him to say: "We all need to say 'No' to some of this!" Luther could be very, very boisterous about this, and none too polite. (Confirmands, when you assert yourself, know you have an ancestor in Luther.) Luther did not intend to start a new church. He didn't like it when people started calling themselves "Lutherans." "We are Christians," he said—as Catholics are, too. We are all Catholics, small "c," part of the one holy and universal church. Luther's goal was not division, but that the church would affirm what had had been there from the beginning: that when we were trapped by all the forces of evil which are all around and inside us, too, when we were trapped, God freed us. God's love for us is freeing, and free, free as the water that pours over our heads in baptism. God's people say yes to that, to God's ever new and renewing love and grace.