

November 11, 2018 – Confirmation Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 1:29-34, 1st Timothy 6: 12-19

What is Happening?

What is happening today, Confirmation Sunday? What is happening to—or by—Ruth, and Tommy, and Kiera? When they come forward for this rite, also known as Affirmation of Baptism, will a dove start flying around their heads, as the bulletin cover art shows? That would be exciting. A bird flew into the church offices this very week, as I was thinking about this sermon, I kid you not. God has a sense of humor. It was pretty exciting for Office Administrator Amy and I—it was startling, and not at all easy to help this wild, beautiful, brisk flyer find its way out. Perhaps instead we should have left bread crumbs in the sanctuary, so it could stick around and add to the atmosphere today, call to mind when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, like a dove. It was at Jesus' baptism that that happened, the evangelists tell us. (As far as we know, Jesus was never confirmed.)

What is happening when you are confirmed? I asked our three students this question individually. One said, "I was just talking about this with my mom!" How good it was to hear this! Pastors love to hear about such conversations: young people talking with their parents about what's happening here. The student said, "I was just talking about this with my mom and I said 'So by doing this, by being confirmed, that means I'll always have God with me...'" (From the way the student said it, it sounded like both an answer, and a question.) "And my mom said, 'You'll always have God with you, whether you get confirmed or not.'" How good it was to hear Mom give such a sound affirmation of grace! God loves you, God cares for you, God will be with you, irrespective of your doing something. God's approval is not something we earn by putting on special clothes and having a special role in worship. So then what is happening in confirmation? That student concluded, "It's me showing everyone that I know that."

Or, as another student put it, "It's me saying in front of everyone, 'I believe in God. I believe God is the creator of good things, and a helper for bad times. I'm a Lutheran Christian. I was baptized as baby; and now that I'm older I can say, 'My parents had the right idea.'" I think that's a tremendous compliment, for a teen to say that about their parents: "They had the right idea." The student continued, "and I want to continue that path, and grow with God, and be a part of this community."

Listen to what the students said about this community, which they found, through Confirmation. Students in the class are often not from the same school, this includes the grade above and below, with whom they spend one of the two years of the program, and they may not be people you would hang out with at your school. All the students noted this, how, in Confirmation, you get to know different people, in different ways, as you go on retreat together, and meet on Saturdays & Sunday mornings for lessons, and serve as acolytes, and do service projects, and do things like play Hide & Seek in the church building. That's an official component of our Confirmation program, Hide & Seek, and it is both loved, and feared. (Sort of like how Luther begins his explanations to the Commandments, in the Small Catechism, they all begin, "We should fear and love God...")

As you can imagine, this church is a great place to play Hide & Seek, and it's a little spooky to do so in the evening with all the lights turned off. Every year we negotiate the groups' comfort levels with dimness and if phone flashlights are allowed. The students told me that Hide

& Seek was one of the things they especially enjoyed in the past two years, and one pointed out that the game is actually theological in nature: “Finding someone in the dark.” I had never thought of that, but I think there’s a sermon there: “God finding us in the dark.” And then, this student said, and this got me thinking even more theologically, “You have to know the person, to know how to look for them.” That could be a sermon, too: God, who knows each and every one of us, knows how to look for us.” This student had examples, too, for how to play Hide & Seek here, with people in your class, knowing who they are: “Are they bold enough to hide in the girls’ bathroom? Or are they someone who can squeeze into small spaces?” Church is a great place to play Hide & Seek. Church is a great place to be found.

A student said, “At school everyone is expecting a lot, always comparing grades. Here everyone is accepted, by God...” This kind of acceptance, they said, “helped me be more confident, and not as stressed out. Being part of this community, meeting different people, I learned to articulate things in a different ways, and to make different connections.” And another said, “I never really understood how other people think about things, but here everyone could explain things in their own way, and it helped me understand how other people see things. I feel that helped me in school. I feel like it helped me as a person in general, and to become who I am today.”

What is happening today? It’s what happened two thousand years ago, in another church, to another young person. Your confirmation Teacher Tim read a Biblical passage about this just a bit ago, an excerpt from an ancient letter to a young person, who as it happens, was named Timothy. The letter writer was reminding young Timothy of the day he “made the good confession, in the presence of many witnesses,” and telling him to “take hold of it.” That’s what Confirmation is, a statement you make in front of a bunch of people, affirming what you’ve been given. Confirmation is taking hold of the life to which you were called. Confirmation is taking hold of grace. It’s knowing you are accepted, and loved, and that God is always with you—and because you know that, becoming the person God made you to be.

But taking hold of grace is not just about that, it’s not just about you, it’s also about the people around you. Taking hold of grace means seeing others as accepted and loved, too, and being in relationship with them in gracious, loving ways, because that’s what God calls us to do, and because God will be there, in them, and with us, when we do, where two or three are gathered.

What is happening today, what has been happening these past two years, is something that can, and should, happen one’s whole life—and it’s only possible because of another life: because of Christ, because God in Christ became one of us, even was baptized like us. It was like a dove descended upon him when that happened. It was startling, and wild, and beautiful, and liberating. And that Spirit remained with him, empowered him, as the Spirit also empowers us. Filled with the Holy Spirit, his life revealed God’s love for all. His death revealed God’s love for all. In fact we could say Jesus was confirmed: Jesus made his confirmation at Calvary, on the cross, and in being raised from death by the power of the Spirit. Easter is God’s resounding affirmation of baptism.

Ruth, Tommy, Kiera, take hold of the life that really is life. Take hold of the eternal life to which you are called, as you make the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.