

“Where Is Your Confidence?”

Philippians 3:4-14

May 16, 2010

7th Sunday of Easter – Confirmation Day

Confirmation Day: many consider this a day of great accomplishment. You (*confirmation students*) might think that as well. After all, you have worked very hard for the past two years. You have studied the Bible, memorized the catechism, answered the questions on the worksheets, recited the memory work, passed the tests, and have done everything I have asked of you. You must be feeling pretty proud of yourselves.

But what does this all mean for you? Have these accomplishments earned you the right to be confirmed and receive Holy Communion? Made you an official member of the Church? Secured for you a place in heaven? How much confidence should you have in what you have accomplished? If you are anything like the apostle Paul, the answer might surprise you.

The apostle Paul, as great as he was, was a lot like you. He had accomplished great things, too. He said, “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more,” and then he lists his accomplishments. He was circumcized on the eighth day, just like you were baptized. He was a purebred Israelite just like you are solid Lutherans. He had studied the Scriptures diligently and became a Pharisee, just like you have studied the Scriptures diligently and are being confirmed. He was very zealous to have the right answers and do away with the wrong answers, just like you are. In fact, Paul was so eager to be right that he persecuted the Christian Church because he thought they were wrong. He always tried to do right and obey the Law of God just like you have tried to do the right thing.

Yet, do you know what Paul says when evaluating all of his accomplishments in terms of how they affected his relationship with God? He counts all of these good things as a loss and considers their value to be the equivalent of putrid garbage. Why such a harsh statement? He realized that putting his confidence in his own accomplishments would draw his attention away from Christ Jesus.

Personal accomplishments would focus attention on himself. Also, he realized that, as good as these things are, they can never be good enough to establish, have, or maintain a relationship with God.

It is the same for you, for everyone sitting here, and for me, as well. When we look to our religious accomplishments and take confidence in them as a way to be right with God, we are in trouble. The attention gets focused on us and away from Christ Jesus. Confirmation Day is a prime example of this temptation. There has already been a lot of attention focused on you in your preparation for this celebration. There will be a lot more attention focused on you in the reception after church, in the cards and gifts you receive, and in dinners and parties to follow the service.

Not only can these things, good though they may be, obscure the focus on Christ, but they may give you the idea that you have accomplished something with regard to your relationship with God. By your studying, memorizing, and other hard work, you may think you have achieved a relationship with God. There is no doubt that you have been good and faithful students, but your goodness and your faithfulness are not enough to establish, have, or maintain a relationship with God. And, to let you in on a secret, no one else in here has been good enough or faithful enough to merit a relationship with God, either.

As we learned in studying the 10 Commandments, God's standards are much higher than just being good and faithful. The Lord God says, "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy." (Lev. 19:2) Jesus said the same thing, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48) In other words, God doesn't grade on a curve. He requires perfection. None of you were perfect in your classwork, much less perfect in your life. The truth of the matter is no one is that way. As the Scripture says, ""There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.... There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:10-12, 22-23)

Sounds like a pretty grim picture, doesn't it? But Paul didn't think so. He said that he counted all of his accomplishments as a disadvantage and all of his achievements as putrid garbage because he had received something far better. In lieu of his accomplishments, he had the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus and in place of his achievements, he had the benefits of Christ's achievements, namely, "be[ing] found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

You (*confirmation students*) are here today – in fact, all of us are here today – not because of who we are or anything we have accomplished, either by our moral living or religious training. We are here because we have received a great gift which we could not earn and did not deserve. Like Paul, we are "in Christ", that is joined to Christ Jesus by virtue of our baptisms. We are connected to Him and everything He has accomplished.

This means that we have a righteousness – a right standing before God – which is not our own and which we have not earned. It is a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. We have His righteousness – His holiness – covering us like the white robes covering you today because of His perfect obedience to God's Law on our behalf. God declares us to be not guilty of all of our sins – all the wrong which we have done and all the good which we have failed to do in thought, word, and deed – because of Christ's sacrifice of His perfect life on the cross. We have a new life with new meaning and a new outcome which even death cannot destroy because of Christ's resurrection from the dead which we recently celebrated on Easter.

All of this is by Jesus' effort and because of His accomplishments. You have not spent the past two years obtaining these things, but learning more about and being strengthened in what you already had. Today, you have the wonderful opportunity to confess that faith before God and before your family in Christ here and to vow, with God's help, to remain true to that faith and that confession.

That's why we celebrate!

However, that doesn't mean the rest of your Christian life is a continuous celebration, full of fun times like today. You will face great pressure to deny or compromise that faith. You will experience great demands to abandon or alter your life to fit in with the world around you. Just ask those around you how difficult this can be. Note those friends and family members in Christ who stood where you stand today, confessed the faith you will confess, and vowed the vows you will make, but are already gone.

None of this should surprise us. It is exactly what Paul himself experienced. He talks about sharing in the sufferings of Christ. That's what all of these temptations and pressures really are: the same sufferings which Christ endured. He was tempted to deny His confession and was pressured to abandon His mission, but He didn't. Now, He goes with us so that we don't either.

How do we do that? Paul is very humble about this. He realizes his weaknesses and recognizes that the Christian faith is not a day-long celebration but a life-long pilgrimage. He describes it this way, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

These are the same words with which I would encourage, not only the confirmation class of 2010, but every Christian sitting here today. Christ has made you His own through your baptisms. Now, you and I press on to claim what has already been given to us. The imagery here is a foot race. Athletes enter a race. They train for many years to be in shape for the race. Finally, they run the race. They cannot afford to be weakened so that they collapse. They continually receive fluids during the race to strengthen them. They can't be distracted by looking backwards or off to the side so that they wander off the course. They forget what is behind them and strain forward to what lies ahead, always keeping their eyes on the finish line.

You (*confirmation students*) enter another lap of that race – a race lots of of us have been running for many years. You were entered in this race at your baptism. You have been in special training these past two years. Now, you go on running in that race. Do not allow yourself to be weakened so that you collapse and lose the race. Come to the Lord's table and be nourished by His body and blood in Holy Communion often so that you may be strengthened and renewed in the forgiveness of your sins. Do not allow yourself to be distracted by the culture, philosophy, or morality of this world which seek to get you off course and lose the race. Continue in the Word of God which you have been studying in earnest for the past two years so that you can clearly see the race course and not be deceived into following another path. Do not go it alone. Continue to be in worship regularly with fellow runners who are running the same race toward the same goal for the same prize so that we can encourage, uphold and strengthen one another. As the author of the book of Hebrews puts it, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:23-25)

Confirmation Day: *it is* a day of great accomplishment. See what God has accomplished in you. He has made you his own in Holy Baptism, washed away your sins, and joined you to Christ Jesus. He has given you faith to receive the blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation. He has prepared you through the study of His Word to confess your faith in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He empowers you to make and keep vows of discipleship. This is a day for you to celebrate and for us to celebrate with you all that God has accomplished, is accomplishing, and will accomplish in you and through you. For in Him and in His Word is your confidence. Amen.

