

## “A Faith That Overcomes”

1 John 5:4-5

May 6, 2018

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – Confirmation Day

It almost sounds like a bad joke delivered by a failing comedian, “What does a Greek goddess, an American athletic shoe company, and confirmation day all have in common?” The answer to this question begins in 1964 and the founding of Blue Ribbon Sports, a new American athletic shoe company. After a few years of mediocre sales, the company decided to look for a better name and logo in 1971 – something that would excite those who use their product. Names that were proposed were: Dimension 6, Peregrine (a majestic falcon), and Bengal, a tiger which would compete with Puma, a different kind of cat representing a different sneaker company. Fortunately, perhaps, none of these names were chosen. One day, one of the executives of the company, in trying to come up with the name that would indicate what their product hope to do – give victory to those who purchase their product – suggested the name of the Greek goddess of victory. After all, their product would help its users to overcome opponents and gain the victory. The name of this Greek goddess? Nike. That name (along with the swoosh that came with it) was chosen. Nike took off almost immediately in popularity and the rest, as they say, is history.

That explains the first two parts of the original question. But what does Nike have to do with confirmation today? The word for the name of the Greek goddess is a word used several times in our text and is translated as “overcome.” In other uses, the word is translated as the verb “to gain the victory” or simply as a noun meaning “victory.”

Overcoming adversaries and gaining victory over opponents and adversaries is what confirmation is all about. While some (especially the catechumen here) may think that that this means confirmation is all about overcoming a difficult two-year course of study, including a lot of memory work; gaining victory over confirmation tests and even defeating nerves that may rattle us in a special service like today with the reward being a big party with friends and relatives who bring lots of cards and gifts and money, it is much more than this. The truth of the matter is that we have far greater adversaries and much stronger opponents than this. The real question is this: will we overcome our adversaries and opponents or will they overcome us? Our lives depend on the answer that question

Who or what are our adversaries? That which needs to be overcome, according to St. John, is the world. Now, God originally created the world perfect, without conflict, and therefore without any opponents or any adversaries. There was perfect harmony between Creator and creation and between God and humanity.

When sin entered the world through the disobedience of Eve and then Adam, everything changed. Sin means more than simply moral failure – doing what God has forbidden or failing to do what God had commanded. Sin introduced an adversarial relationship between God and His creation. Sin brought with it a corrosive nature which would eat away at and destroy all which God had created good.

The world, which had been created for our good, now worked for our downfall. The earth was cursed with thorns and thistles so that even producing the basic food to

eke out a meager existence would be a difficult, frustrating, and often unsuccessful task. Life was cursed with death as the judgment of and punishment for sin which, eventually, reached every single inhabitant on the face of the year. Humanity would be cursed with a most formidable foe, an opponent whose very name means “adversary” – Satan. Satan, in his hatred for God, delighted in our suffering and became, as St. Peter says, like a roaring lion seeking to devour us.

The Confirmation Class of 2018 learned these truths well as it studied the Ten Commandments and Luther’s meaning of those Commandments. (By the way, it should be noted that James did very well here. You could say that he was in a class all by himself.) The law shows us our sin in thought, word, and deed; convicts us of our guilt, and prescribes the punishment of death in this life and death in hell forever.

There is no hope of overcoming our adversaries and gaining victory over our opponents. Death always wins because all people always sin. Our effort to improve ourselves and make ourselves acceptable to God always fails because we can never attain His required standard of perfection. And, as we sink under the burden of our sin and are swallowed up in despair because of the utter hopelessness to change that situation, we always have the devil – the prince of this world – there as the strongest adversary to push us over the edge and destroy us.

When one is confronted with such a battle and fight, many think the solution is to suck it up and fight harder and win. We always think that, if we cannot do better and improve ourselves so as to be more acceptable to God on our own, we can win if we have enough faith or a stronger faith. You’ll hear lots of people talking about “my faith got me through this,” or “my faith was strong.”

Sad to say, we cannot possibly win the victory over our enemies and adversaries because we are so stuck in the muck and the mire of sin and death. It’s like trying to win a 100 meter dash while running in a tar pit. You can’t win and you can’t even run. In the same way our best efforts fail us and our worst efforts condemn us. Not only can we not win the battle, we can’t even fight the fight.

However, we have someone to fight for us and in our place. Martin Luther writes in his famous Reformation hymn, “No strength of ours can match his (Satan’s) might. We would be lost, rejected. But now a champion comes to fight, Whom God himself elected. You ask who this may be? The Lord of hosts is He, Christ Jesus, mighty Lord, God’s only Son adored. He holds the field victorious.” We have our Nike, Jesus Christ, who fights in our place and wins for us.

First, He took on sin and overcame it. He did this by taking our place under God’s law and obeying His law in our place. He did all of the good which was required of us. He resisted and refused all of the evil which was forbidden to us. God the Father was well pleased. His perfect obedience is credited to our account before God.

In addition to actively doing what was required of us, Jesus also passively allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross and die as the perfect and complete sacrifice and payment for all of our sins. Jesus has overcome our sin by defeating its ability to condemn us. Satisfaction has been made for our sin and holiness – Christ’s own holiness – has been given to us in the waters of Holy Baptism.

Secondly, Jesus took on death and won the victory by rising from the dead to life and from the tomb to heaven. He did this, not to rescue himself or as an example of His great power, but as the firstfruits, that is, the one who leads the way so that more will rise from death to life and from the grave to heaven.

Thirdly, Jesus fought Satan and defeated him, too. Jesus rendered him unable to harm us anymore. Satan's only tactic against us was the fear of condemnation, but that's been done away with. Satan's only weapon to defeat us is death itself. And Jesus has defeated death. The once mighty Satan, who is compared to a lion who roars and destroys, is now more like a toothless lion who can roar, but is weak and powerless

In Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit washed away our sin, clothed us in Christ's righteousness, and gave us the faith to receive God's blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Our enemies – sin and death – and are adversary – the devil – have been defeated. We have the victory. Their realm, the world in which they fought against us, has been defeated, as well. Therefore, as our text rightly says, "for everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world."

But how exactly have we attained this victory? How did we win? Our text says, "And this is the victory that is overcome the world – our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" Does this mean that we have won the victory through our act of believing? Some Christians think so. However, this often leads either to pride (look how strong I have believed.) Or despair (my faith is so weak).

However, while it is certainly faith that overcomes the world, it is not the act of believing which does it, but the object of faith that does it. James, it is fondly remembered by many in this congregation, including myself, that you used to cling rather strongly to a rather odd object of faith: a large stuffed pig. You loved that pig and held on tightly to it when you brought it to church. I believe you looked to it for comfort when you were sad, protection when you were afraid, and for help in anything you needed. However, although you held on to it tightly, it really did nothing for you. For even though you had a strong faith and held on tightly, you didn't get any real tangible blessing from your beloved pig because it had no power to do anything. The power of your believing in it could do nothing because the pig had no power.

Many people are holding strongly on to things as powerless as the pink pig with the hope that they will somehow be able to overcome the world and all of its evil. They may hang onto their good works, their religion, or even their faith (a heresy called fideism which means faith in faith). But none of them work because none of them have the power to overcome the world and all of its evil.

But Jesus has the power to overcome anything and everything and He has done just that. As we look at the world with all of its evil, all of its suffering, all of its opposition to God and all that is good, there seems to be no hope which is why so many people try so hard with their moral character, their religion, or their faith to find some measure of hope of overcoming the world. But Jesus, while gathering with his disciples on the night before he died when everything seemed at their darkest, said "I

have said these things to you, that in me you may peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world.”

Jesus has overcome the world and gained the victory. He has “nike-ed” and won. The word in the Greek is what is called the perfect tense which means an action that has taken place in the past which has been completed but still has effects for the future. The victory is not only for the people of Jesus’ time, but for us as well. Jesus has overcome the world and gained the victory for us. He overcame our sin and gain the victory by fulfilling God’s law for us and paying the price for our sin so that we are forgiven. He is overcome death for us and gained the victory by rising from death to life and from the grave to heaven so that we will live forever.

What part does faith play in this overcoming and victory? Faith is rather passive. Faith unites us to Christ in Whom is the real victory. It merely receives what Christ Himself has attained. As the Confirmation Class of 2018 learned, Christ won the forgiveness for sin and everlasting life on the cross and in the tomb. However, Christ delivers forgiveness and life in “the Means of Grace”: Holy Baptism, Confession & Absolution, and the Lords Supper.

In order to overcome the world, sin, death and, hell, one needs to have faith. In order to have faith, retain face, grow in faith, and have a strong enough faith, it is crucial that all, not only the catechumens, to be constantly absorbing the Word of God in all of its forms and opportunities. Two years of special instruction is good, but continued regular attendance at Divine Service, Sunday school, family devotions, and personal Bible reading on your own is essential.

The vows or promises that we all have made in which you, James, make today are crucial in order to overcome the world. First, there is faithfulness to the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. John emphasizes the need to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the son of God. Second, there is also a pledge to Christian living. As you may remember, we’ve actually tried to move away from calling this process “confirmation” as if it were merely another class you took, studied for, and graduated from. Catechesis is training and the life of the Christian. It’s ultimately all about life. Doctrine influences life and the life of Christ drives us. As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

James, your confirmation verse which you chose for this day fits in very well with the theme. Psalm 27:1 says, “the Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” Life can be pretty scary. The darkness of evil, the evil of the world around us, and the ever present specter of death all conspire to create fear in us. As things seem to get worse, there is the feeling that we are losing the war and that all of our enemies and adversaries shall overcome us and defeat us. However, the Lord God has gained the victory over sin, the world, and death itself. He has connected us to himself by faith and in faith we share that victory. To answer the questions of your confirmation verse, “Whom shall I fear?... Of whom shall I be afraid?” The answer is simple: no one or and nothing. The victory of Christ is yours. Amen