

"The Confirmed Life"

Acts 2:42-47

May 15, 2011

4th Sunday Of Easter (Confirmation Day)

I used to hate exercising. Oh, I played sports and engaged in various physical activities. But I was never a big fan of the discipline of consistent and regular exercise. I would work out if I had to – in order to make a sports' team or because a phys. ed. class required it. But I didn't enjoy it. It was boring. I never thought I had time to exercise and I always thought it would reduce my energy and make me more tired. It was easier to just sit on the couch and watch television. As I got older, I knew I should exercise. I knew it would be good for me, but I still didn't want to do it. And, if I didn't *have* to exercise, I usually didn't.

Natalie and Reilly, this story may remind you of your experience in confirmation class. For the past two years, you've been involved in things you had to do: study Scripture and Luther's Small Catechism, read a text book, do a workbook, and lots of memorization (which seemed like even more when you fell behind). Maybe you did these things only because you had to do them, but you really didn't want to do them. You've known what confirmation class has been like. Do you know what the confirmed life after today will be like?

Maybe you'll be like I was with exercise: when you no longer *have* to do these things, you won't. Maybe you'll be relieved. You won't have to come to church any more. You won't have to learn the Bible or study the Catechism. And you won't have to memorize anything any more. Sure, you know these things are probably good for you and that you should do them. But you'll feel you won't have time to continue in these things and it will just wear you out to keep doing those things when you have better things to do.

I'll share a little secret with you: that's the way it's always been with most every confirmation class. Furthermore, that's the struggle which your parents and every other adult in this church have had to deal with. What do you do with the Word of God when you are not forced to hear it, read it, or

study it? According to our sinful natural selves, we don't want to have anything to do with God or His Word. The Scriptures say, "The sinful mind is hostile to God." (Rom. 8:7) We will read the Bible and do required work when forced to, but, left up to us, we won't want to do it and probably won't do it. Many choose to abandon what they have done in confirmation class almost as soon as it is over. That is how they live their confirmed lives.

But it's not the way it's always been. Our text for this day from the book of Acts gives a different picture of the Church than the one we often see today. It shows what people did after they were baptized like you and instructed like you. Did they bail out after that? Not at all. It says they were devoted to, persistent in, and held fast to several things: the apostles' teaching, fellowship (being together), the breaking of bread (the Lord's Supper), and the prayers (formal worship together). Why?

Going back to my experience with exercise, I was still against it when our family moved to Great Falls. Nobody tried to force me to exercise. But our family joined a gym. I voluntarily committed myself to a regular time to exercise in a class with other people. I discovered something very important about exercising. Before, I had been doing it for the sake of doing it. Now, I was doing it for the sake of the benefits it provides. I feel healthier. I rarely get sick. Instead of robbing me of energy, exercising gives me more energy. Instead of making me weaker, exercising makes me stronger.

Now, instead of avoiding exercise, I can't wait to do it. Instead of having to do it, I want to do it. I want the benefits it gives so much that I don't want to neglect my work outs. I miss them whenever I can't do them.

Something like this happened in the early church. They were not doing anything because they had to. They recognized the blessings which the Lord wanted them to have so they eagerly devoted themselves to these things.

The people in the early Church held fast to the apostles' doctrine because they recognized that, through the apostles' teaching, they were hearing the very voice of the Lord in their very turbulent world. So they persisted in learning that teaching and putting it into practice.

The people recognized that being together was not a worthless requirement, but a source of strength. When they gathered together, they shared a meal which culminated in the Lord's Supper. Thus, they not only heard the voice of the Lord, but were in His direct presence through His body and blood in the Supper. They worshiped together for the support and encouragement which the Lord gave through that.

If you continue reading, you see how their lives were changed by the Lord. The benefits they received through their devotion to the Word of God, the gathering together, the Lord's Supper, and worship influenced their lives on a daily basis. They shared their possessions together and cared for those who were in need. They did not meet just on Sunday because they had to. They were together every day because they wanted to – in formal worship in the temple and in meals in their homes. Their thankfulness and praise were evident to those outside of the church who favored them. This contagious faith, worship and joy attracted people whom the Lord added to the church on a daily basis.

Natalie and Reilly, this can be your experience as well. In fact, it can be the experience of anyone gathered here today who has been confirmed or who will be confirmed. Just because the time of formal assignments and requirements is over doesn't mean your faith life needs to be over. Your faith life does not have to be a series of things you do only because you have to, but a source of blessings you receive because you want to.

What I would say to you I would say to everyone who is here today: continue to be devoted to the Word of God, not as an assignment to complete or a requirement to fulfill, but to hear His voice speak to you. The pain, disappointment, sadness, and guilt you experience on an everyday basis which you attribute to various sources and think are reasons for not coming here are actually caused

by you being out of alignment with God and His will. Both here and in Bible Class, you will hear the Law of God show you your sin and failings and condemn them.

But the Word of God will also give you the joy and comfort which you think possessions, popularity, or success will give you, but can't. Here, in the Word of God, you will hear of God's unlimited and unfailing love for you in Jesus Christ. You will be told, taught, and reminded how Jesus took your sin upon Himself, suffered your punishment on the cross, and died as the sacrifice for your sins. In these very words, you will receive the forgiveness for all of your sins and the peace which such forgiveness gives.

Although you may be tempted to isolate yourself and confine your interaction with other human beings to emails, texts, and Tweets, resist that urge. Be in the fellowship of God's people here in church. Again, I urge this, not as a requirement, but as a benefit. When I was a camp counselor, I demonstrated this benefit by going to a blazing campfire and taking one stick out. When in the fire with other sticks, that stick burned brightly. When it was taken out by itself, it soon went out. In the same way, our faith burns its brightest when we are together with other Christians. When we are isolated our faith is in danger of burning out.

In the same way, we are stronger in love and hope when we are together than when we are by ourselves. I once asked a young man in a confirmation class if he could break a pencil. He was confident that he could and when I handed him a single pencil, he broke it easily. When I took ten pencils, put a rubber band around them, and asked him to break them, he couldn't. We are strong together.

But our strength does not come from ourselves or our togetherness. Our strength comes from the presence of the living Lord among us. The early Church really believed that and their lives reflected that belief. Jesus is not any less among us than He was among them. Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) We say that but do we believe that? The Lord is alive and among us in our worship in this place. He has promised, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

(Matt. 18:21) The prayers – our formal worship here – is straight out of the Scripture. He speaks to us through the reading and preaching of His Word, as well as the speaking and singing of the liturgy. He comes to us directly when He gives His very body and blood in the Lord's Supper for us to eat and drink. In doing so, He distributes the forgiveness of sins won on the cross and guaranteed by the empty tomb to each of us in a very personal way.

My prayer for you (and everyone else here) is that you will find out in your confirmed life what I found out about exercise: that the benefits are so important and so desired that you will want to be involved even when you are not required to be involved or forced by your parents to be involved. Come for the peace that passes all human understanding in the forgiveness of sins. Come for the fellowship of like-minded Christians who will strengthen and support you as you strengthen and support them. Come to experience the presence of the living Lord Jesus Christ in His Word, His Supper, and His Service. Let His love flow in you and through you as live lives of service to those around you so that they may be attracted to God's Word and added to God's family just as you have been.

Natalie and Reilly, today is a very happy and special day. It is your confirmation day. Such a day brings back memories to many of your family and friends of when they were in the place you are right now – confessing your faith and vowing, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to continue in that faith for the rest of your lives. May your confirmed lives be just as joyous and just as special as you remain “devoted...to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Find in those things benefits so needed and so desired that you live in them daily and find that you can't live without them. Amen.