



Liturgical Day: The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Date: May 17, 2009

Title: Adults in the Faith

Christ is Risen! Christ is risen, indeed!

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Well, this is a big day at Saint Peter Lutheran Church. We have, here in the front two rows, a group of eleven eighth graders who have been studying, exploring and practicing the faith together for three years. We call what they've just experienced "Catechism" – a Greek word that means *teaching*. It's not the kind of catechism experience that most of us who grew up in the Lutheran Church had when we were younger. My catechism had to do with reading textbooks, filling out workbooks and worksheets, and listening to the teacher explain to us what the faith was all about. As well intended as my teachers were, it was a pretty dreary experience. At the end of the journey, we knew more about the Bible and the faith and the church – we even knew more about God – but I'm not sure it was necessarily an experience that strengthened my faith or deepened my relationship with God.

These days, we've taken a different approach. We use music and worship and games and stories and service events and sometimes even skits – all in the hope of stirring both the minds and the hearts of these young people; all in the hope of helping them grow into a faith that can make a difference in their lives for many years to come. This morning is an opportunity for you and me to celebrate their presence in our midst – a time for us to celebrate the faith that God has given to them.

So, friends, you're done. You have attended three years worth of Sunday Evening Workshops. You have put together your Family Faith Project. You have spent at least a week at camp during the summer at Rainbow Trail. You have participated in a number of service events. And your all-time-favorite: you have completed 45 Sunday Morning Review Sheets. So, congratulations. You've completed your assignments. You're accomplished what you set out to do. As far as the catechism check list is concerned, you're done.

You're done with Catechism, that is. But don't for a minute think that you are done with us. That has happened, you know. There have been times when kids have gone all the way through Catechism – they attended all the events and did all the work, and when it was over, they were done with the church. We never saw them again.

It's like the story of the bats in the church bell tower. Have you heard that one? An old church had one of those tall steeples with a bell in it. Bats had taken to living in the tower, and they were everywhere. It was a terrible nuisance. So the church leaders decided to get rid of them. They put out traps: the traps caught a few bats, but they were replaced by other bats immediately. They put out poison: the same thing. They tried to close in the open spaces with screen material: the bats just worked their way through the seams. They called an exterminator: he tried everything, and nothing worked. The pastor was telling this sad story to a friend, and the friend calmly said, "I can get rid of the bats." The pastor was shocked. "How do you do it?" "Easy," he replied. "I'll come by next weekend." So he did: he met a group of people at the church on Saturday morning, and did exactly what we're going to do with you this morning. They held a worship service. He confirmed the bats in their faith: he had them make affirmation of their

baptism, and the church never saw them again.

Guess what? That's not going to happen with you. As a matter of fact, I know that this weekend

FIRST LESSON

Acts 10:44-48

PSALM

PSALM 98

SECOND LESSON

1st JOHN 5:1-6

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 15:9-17

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O GOD, YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE YOU JOYS BEYOND UNDERSTANDING. POUR INTO OUR HEARTS SUCH LOVE FOR YOU THAT, LOVING YOU ABOVE ALL THINGS, WE MAY OBTAIN YOUR PROMISES, WHICH EXCEED ALL WE CAN DESIRE; THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, YOUR SON AND OUR LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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God's work. Our hands.

is going to mark in your lives a new beginning. And not just a new beginning in your relationship with Saint Peter, or with the Lutheran Church; but a new beginning in your relationship with God. Because I've seen something in you. I know that in these past three years, you've experienced God – and that it has touched your hearts and filled your lives.

This morning's Gospel lesson is from St. John 15, and it is set during Holy Week. Jesus is at the table with his followers, sharing a last supper with them that will lead to what we now call Holy Communion. After the meal, he gives them a commandment. I recently read an article that helped me to see that Jesus didn't give commandments very often.ⁱ He gave his followers many beatitudes (a Latin word for blessings), and he led them to truths that could help them live well. But he rarely gave commandments. Instead, he told parables, and extended warm invitations for people to join him in faithfulness.

It is significant, then, to note that this passage is one of the few places where he gives a commandment. He does so in a way that makes it absolutely clear how important this is. He says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Jesus commands his followers; he commands you and me to love one another. And note that it is not just any kind of love that he commands us to practice with each other. He commands us to love one another in the same way that he has loved us.

Think about that. How has God loved us? God has forgiven us. God has pledged to be fully in our lives at all times. God has publicly displayed, in the death of Jesus, a deep and powerful love for us. God has made great sacrifices on our behalf. This is what God's love is. And this is the kind of love that is commended to us – the kind of love Jesus wants us to have for one another. A love that causes us to forgive one another. A love that calls us to be there for one another at all times. A love that is lived out publicly so others can see it. A love that calls us to make sacrifices for one another. That is the kind of love that God invites us to receive, and that is the kind of love that God calls us to extend.

So here's the thing: today, as you affirm your baptism, you will become an adult in the church. There are a lot of differences between children and adults. Can you name some of the differences for me? (*Children are smaller. Adults have more life experiences. Children have fewer privileges. Adults have more responsibilities. Children have less freedom. Adults have less free time.*) There are many differences, but let me remind you about a key difference between children and adults. Children focus on what they want, or on what they can get. Adults are more mature, and focus, instead, on what they can give. Now you'll realize, right away, that not everyone who is older behaves like an adult. And not everyone who is younger behaves like a child. I know some 60 year-olds who act like children. And I know some 14 year-olds who act like adults. The difference has to do with the focus of our lives. Are we living for ourselves, and only interested in others for what we can get out of them? Or are we living for others, and wanting to give of ourselves in ways that help others to be well?

This morning, as you become adults in this church, Jesus teaches us – oops: no, I should have said Jesus commands us – to love one another as he has loved us. Jesus commands us to be adults. Jesus commands us to quit acting like children: all of us. Whether we are 14, and just finishing up a three year period of studying and practicing the faith, or whether we are 64 and working to put our kids through college, or getting used to being a grandparent – no matter how old we are, Jesus commands us, this morning, to love one another as he loves us – to be adults – to be the kind of people who are able to look beyond ourselves, and see the needs of this world, and become part of God's answer to those needs.

Now here's the kicker. This may be a command from Jesus, but it is not an oppressive, painful burden that we now have to carry through the rest of our lives. No, it is an invitation to experience the presence of Jesus in our lives every day. He commands us to love. And he says that if we keep his commandments, we will abide in his love: we will be surrounded by his love; we will be immersed in his love. And do you see: that is what we want for you. That is what your parents want for you. That is what your Catechism Guides want

ⁱ "Comments and Observations on St. John 15:9-17" by Scott Hoezee; in "This Week at the Center for Excellence in Preaching" (<http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>)

for you. That is what your Godparents, and family and friends here at Saint Peter want for you. We want you to abide in God's love. We want you to be surrounded by God's love. We want you to be immersed in God's love. And let me tell you: there is nothing in this world that is more powerful than to be immersed in God's love. That will happen, as you learn to love one another as Jesus has loved you.

That's why I'm so confident that this isn't going to be an ending for you. I know that you have experienced God's love in the past three years. You've experienced it as you've studied, worshipped, played, laughed and served together. And I know that in your hearts, this love of God is something that you want to have in your lives for many years to come.

So welcome, friends, to adult membership in this church. Welcome into the kind of Christ-love that that Jesus invites us to experience and calls us to extend to others. Welcome to the richest experience of belonging and meaning and purpose that you'll ever have in life. This may be an end to your time as a Catechism student. But I pray that it will be a new beginning for each of you in your relationship with God, and in your desire to live an adult life in this world – a life of sacrificial Christ-like love.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (May 17, 2009)

Lessons

Gospel Lesson; English Text: ⁱⁱ

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹² This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. ⁱⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

⁹ Καθὼς ἠγάπησεν με ὁ πατήρ, καγὼ ὑμᾶς ἠγάπησα· μείνατε ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ τῇ ἐμῇ. ¹⁰ ἂν τὰς ἐντολάς μου τηρήσητε, μενεῖτε ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ μου, καθὼς ἐγὼ τὰς ἐντολάς τοῦ πατρός μου τηρήρηκα καὶ μένω αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ. ¹¹ Ταῦτα λελάληκα ὑμῖν ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἡ ἐμῇ ἐν ὑμῖν ἢ καὶ ἡ χαρὰ ὑμῶν πληρωθῇ. ¹² Αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἐντολὴ ἡ ἐμῇ, ἵνα ἀγαπάτε ἀλλήλους καθὼς ἠγάπησα ὑμᾶς. ¹³ μείζονα ταύτης ἀγάπην οὐδεὶς ἔχει, ἵνα τις τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ θῇ ὑπὲρ τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ. ¹⁴ ὑμεῖς φίλοι μου ἐστε ἂν ποιῆτε ἐγὼ ἐντέλλομαι ὑμῖν. ¹⁵ οὐκέτι λέγω ὑμᾶς δούλους, ὅτι ὁ δούλος οὐκ οἶδεν τί ποιεῖ αὐτοῦ ὁ κύριος· ὑμᾶς δὲ εἶρηκα φίλους, ὅτι πάντα ἤκουσα παρὰ τοῦ πατρός μου ἐγνώρισα ὑμῖν. ¹⁶ οὐχ ὑμεῖς με ἐξελέξασθε, ἀλλ' ἐγὼ ἐξελεξάμην ὑμᾶς καὶ ἔθηκα ὑμᾶς ἵνα ὑμεῖς ὑπάγητε καὶ καρπὸν φέρητε καὶ ὁ καρπὸς ὑμῶν μένη, ἵνα ἅν αἰτήσητε τὸν πατέρα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι μου δῶ ὑμῖν. ¹⁷ ταῦτα ἐντέλλομαι ὑμῖν, ἵνα ἀγαπάτε ἀλλήλους. ^{iv}

ⁱⁱ Link to: <http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary/> for a listing of Bible lessons for the coming weeks.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. John 15:9-17, *New Revised Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^{iv} St. John 9-17, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).