

Day of Pentecost
Confirmation Sunday

I hate to admit it and my friends from high school would never believe it, but **occasionally** when I'm driving to church, I listen to country music. And the reason I do is that a lot of country songs tell a story. Sometimes the stories they tell aren't so great, not exactly sermon material, but one song I heard, got me thinking.

The song is called, "The Best Day" by George Strait. Maybe you've heard it. It's a song about a father and his son and it tells the story of the son growing up and some of the special times he shared with his dad. Each part of the story is a snapshot of their life together:

- the son's first camping and fishing trip with his dad;
- an old sports car that the dad brings home for his son, when he's a teenager
- and the son's wedding day

And at each of these moments in his life, the son says: "Dad, this could be the **best** day of my life." This song got me thinking about two things:

First, since this is Confirmation Sunday it got me thinking about the young people who will be affirming their faith this morning.

Holly, Rachel, Juliet, Ben, Sammi, Rachel, and Ryan this is a special day in your lives. Your confirmation is milestone. It's a day to celebrate and a day to be remembered. And our hope as a congregation is that when you look back on this day you might remember it, as one of the best days of your life.

The second thing the song got me thinking about is the fact that life is a journey. Each snapshot of this father and son gives us a picture of another milestone as the boy grows up and becomes a man.

In the same way our life of faith is a journey. Confirmation Sunday, is one snapshot or one picture in a whole album of our life with God.

And our story with God begins in Holy Baptism. That's why we call today, an "Affirmation of Baptism" service.

But that also raises a good question. A lot of people who aren't familiar with the Lutheran church would ask us, "What is the difference between baptism and confirmation?"

Or, another way they might ask the question, is to say, "Why don't you just wait until the 8th grade and then ask the students if they want to be baptized?" That's a natural question, especially if you've come from a Baptist background.

There are two answers to that question and the first one is from the Bible.

The church, going all the way back to the book of Acts, has baptized children and infants. In the book of Acts, men, women, and children were baptized. We are told that whole households or families came to be baptized. And that means all the children in the family including infants, because the Book of Acts does not mention any age requirement.

The longer answer is a theological one.

While we certainly respect the Baptist tradition and count those who are Baptist as our brothers and sisters in Christ, we do have a different understanding on this particular teaching.

As Lutherans, we place a greater emphasis on what God is doing in baptism. We believe that in Holy Baptism, God is making us his children and that by His grace alone, we are saved. And Infant baptism is a powerful sign of God's saving grace.

And so today, when we celebrate a service called "Affirmation of Baptism" we're talking about faith in God's saving grace.

As Lutherans we strongly believe in Paul's words from Ephesians, chapter 2 where he says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith."

Holy Baptism, is not just a ritual we do with water. If you remember your catechism, Luther taught us that "it is not water that does these things, but God's Word with the water, and our trust in this Word."

When Holly, Rachel, Juliet, Ben, Sammi, Rachel, and Ryan were baptized there were some promises made.

At that time, these important promises were made on their behalf: parents and sponsors promised to faithfully bring them to the services of God's house, and teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments; to place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith.

At every baptism, we, as a congregation, also promise to help parents fulfill these vows.

Today is significant, because today is the day, when each of these young people, have the opportunity to claim this faith they have been raised in as their own. The promises that were made on their behalf now are coming full circle. In Holy Baptism they became children of God and inheritors of eternal life.

Today, they have the opportunity to claim that identity, make public profession of their faith, and to receive our blessing.

So far we've talked about how baptism is the beginning of our faith story and confirmation is a significant milestone when we affirm our faith. But this morning these 8th graders will be confirmed and you might be wondering what's next?

Several years ago, I heard a speaker who had some very challenging news for us. His name is Rollie Martinson and he was a professor of Youth Ministry at Luther Seminary in St. Paul Minnesota. And he shared some rather alarming statistics.

In our church, the ELCA, we have a high percentage of baptized children who participate in Sunday School and confirmation. That's the good news.

The bad news is that approximately 65%-75% of baptized and confirmed youth, cease participation in worship in the life of their congregation, by age 21.

Even worse, while it was true years ago, that most of these youth returned to the church at the time of marriage or at the birth of children, today that is happening less and less.

Up to 60% of the youth who drop out of the church by age 21, have not returned to any faith community by age 35. The sad truth that these statistics tell, is that we are losing too many of our youth after confirmation.

But that's not all there is to the story.

Professor Martinson went on to share **8 Faith Factors** which have been identified in the committed youth who did not drop out of the church.

Beyond confirmation, young people who have a strong faith share these things in common.

- One, they come from families where faith is at the center, where faith is integrated into the family's identity and practice, where the question, "What would Jesus do, is asked and taken seriously.
- Two, these young people could identify two or more adult faith mentors.
- Three, they have been involved in a significant experience of Christian service, like a mission trip or serving as a Bible camp counselor.
- Four, they been serving in their church at an early age as acolytes, and greeters, and readers, and musicians.
- Five, they found their church to be engaging and meaningful and a place where youth were valued.
- Six, they experienced an excellent High school or young adult ministry.

- Seven, they were encouraged by strong Christian friends.
 - and finally, number eight, they found support from their Christian community during a personal crisis.
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Now that's quite a list and the temptation we might feel when we hear a list like this, is to think we can never measure up, that we fall short in way or another.

Eighth graders, you might be wondering right now, about your own faith journey and about where that journey may take you. So let me share a word of encouragement.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus' disciples had plenty of doubts and fears. They had deserted Jesus at the cross and were hiding in fear of the Romans. But Jesus, himself came and stood among them, and said to them, "Peace be with you."

The promise here, is that when we are lacking in faith, Jesus will continue to seek us out, to find us when we are lost, and will call us back into relationship with him. Even when our journey in life takes away from the church and distracts with things that are not life-giving, Jesus is always calling us home.

And in today's Gospel Jesus not only says, "Peace be with you." He breathes on them His Holy Spirit. He doesn't abandon them. He doesn't ascend into heaven and leave them as orphans. He gives them his very own Spirit, to live within them, to give them strength, and power, and courage.

And eighth graders this is the same Holy Spirit that God breathed on you in Holy Baptism, and will fill you again today, as we lay our hands of prayer on you and pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to fill you, and strengthen you, and empower you.

In 1 John, chapter 3 we hear these words,
"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God."

May God bless you, and may you always know how much God loves you. Amen