

## **A New Covenant**

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Reformation Sunday | All Three Readings

### **Intro**

I never went through the Confirmation process  
our young people did in order to get to this point today.

I was born and raised in a “culturally Christian” home:  
prayers at meal time and bed time;  
read Christmas story in December  
and Easter story in Spring.

My parents were highly moral persons; very civic minded,  
but we rarely went to church when I was growing up.  
As an adult, I learned that this was a source of friction  
between my paternal grandmother and my parents.  
She was a very devout and active member  
of the Congregational Church, and she never liked the fact  
that I wasn’t baptized or taken to church as a child.

I joined the Lutheran church when I was 20;  
I was baptized after attending a 6 week new member class.  
I never experienced 2 years of Wednesday night classes;  
or a week of Confirmation camp at Mt. Cross;  
or 8 weeks of mentoring in 9th grade.

What a journey our Confirmands have been on!  
Congratulations for all your hard work!

Of course, in the “good old days”  
things were a lot tougher for the Confirmands.  
I’ve spoken to some of the long-time Lutherans  
in the different churches I’ve been privileged to serve.  
They tell of students sitting in front of the congregation,  
on Confirmation Sunday, and having questions tossed at them  
like so many live hand grenades:

“Name the fifth commandment!”

“What’s the second article of the creed?”

“How many sacraments do Lutherans have?”

“What’s the significance of Holy Baptism?”

“Recite Luther’s explanation to the first article of the creed.”

The students were expected to know the answers.  
And in the really old days,  
both questions and answers weren’t in English, but  
in the congregation’s mother tongue.

My French is a little rusty,  
but I’m sure if we sang a hymn now  
some members of the congregation and I could come up with  
some questions for you to answer?  
Whaddya say?

What’s the phrase used to describe  
Jesus’ presence in Holy Communion?

Do Lutherans believe in transubstantiation or consubstantiation?

Name two of Luther’s colleagues in the Reformation and their  
contribution to the theological and social reforms of the 16th century?

This all sounds a little too intimidating to me!  
It’s a good thing that our salvation isn’t dependent on what we know;  
or really, on anything we can do.  
This was one of the fundamental insights of the Reformation  
that Luther and his colleagues brought to the table.  
Before, the church taught that one’s relationship with God could be  
restored by acts of penance; by doing certain faith actions like  
making a financial contribution, or  
going on a pilgrimage to a holy place, or  
performing an act of charity for another.

But through a lot of study and prayer and conversation,  
God revealed to Luther and his friends that our relationship with God  
can only be made right through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.  
While there are certain faith actions we can and should do,  
these are meant to strengthen our faith  
and to train ourselves to focus more on God and less on ourselves.

They deepen our faith connection to God,  
but they don't restore the connection that was broken by our sin.

### **God's Nature**

For that is God's nature: to restore that which is broken.  
to bring into relationship that which is estranged.

The story of the Old Testament is the story of  
God doing what was necessary to bring  
Adam and Eve, and later  
Noah and his family, and later  
Abraham and Sarah and their family, and later  
the people of Israel  
into relationship with God.

Over and over again, God's people wandered away from God,  
and over and over again, God reached out to bring the people back.  
God wanted to have a relationship with the Israelites,  
and God wants the same thing with us.

The ongoing faith challenge of every age is complacency;  
that life is pretty much all right as it is;  
that we really don't need God after all.

A man named John Elliott  
was caught in a blizzard high in the Rocky mountains.  
He became lost, and finally he saw a cabin  
and crawling to the door with his last ounce of strength,  
he found it to be unlocked and he crawled in.

But being dazed and near exhaustion,  
he didn't light a fire or take off his wet clothing.  
He laid on the floor sinking into oblivion,  
paralyzed by the pleasure of the storm's icy caress.  
Suddenly, his St. Bernard dog came into the cabin,  
for he too had become loss from his master.  
He saw his master lying on the floor,  
and began to arouse John from his nearly comatose state.

The ranger said later that the dog had saved his life.

John said, "When you're freezing to death  
you actually feel warm all over,  
and don't wake up because it feels too good."

Sometimes we're like that in our spiritual lives.  
We actually don't realize the state of sin we are in,  
because everything seems so good.  
We don't see our need for Christ because we feel  
we are really handling our salvation pretty good by ourselves.  
But as Paul says, it is only through Christ Jesus  
that we can be free from sin death and the power of the devil.

As Luther says it is not my work  
but the work of Christ in me that sets me free.  
Or as Jesus says in our gospel lesson,  
"So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

As we continue to surrender our sinful selves to Christ,  
we will become free in Him to live the kind of life  
he has called us to live.  
There is that daily surrender,  
that daily drowning of my sinful self in the waters of my baptism  
and then letting Christ raise me as a new and cleansed person.

There is for us a conscious decision  
of asking for Christ to drown my sins daily  
and letting raise up a new me.  
You and I can and should participate in this figurative daily baptism.

I can and am born again each day in Christ.  
I have an active part to play in that process.  
I need to bring myself to Christ,  
I need to surrender to Christ those sins,  
those things that separate me from God  
and from those around me.

But it seems to me,  
we Lutheran have not taken as seriously  
this part of our understanding of Baptism.

We don't see the daily consequence of Baptism  
for our faith journey on this earth.  
It is not an act with no consequence for the future,  
yes it is an act that happens once,  
but we live in the consequence of it each day.

Each day I surrender my sinful to Christ,  
he grabs me, pushed me down into the water of my Baptism,  
cleanses me, and raises me to a new life  
so that I might serve Him and my neighbor.  
I must surrender to Him daily.  
I must acknowledge my sinful self daily

But I think a lot of us like to straddle the fence on this one.  
We don't really see that daily we need to do this,  
or we don't like to admit to ourselves that we are really sinners  
in daily need of Christ's forgiveness.

So we are like a little boy who wanted to ride a horse,  
but seeing that the horse was bigger close up than he thought,  
he decided to proceed cautiously.  
He climbed a wooden fence where the horse was standing  
and mounted him from there.  
With one foot on the left side of the top fence rail,  
he threw the other leg over the horse who was on the right side.

Immediately the horse began to walk slowly away from the fence.  
The boy hadn't planned on that  
and he needed to make a hasty decision.  
He wanted to both ride the horse  
and to hold on to the security of the fence.  
Needless to say,  
after his legs had stretched as far as they would go,  
he fell face down on the ground.

We like to straddle the fence  
of admitting to ourselves that daily we need to return  
to the waters of our Baptism and drown our sinful self  
and allow Christ to raise up a new me.

## A New Covenant

First service folks doing their own affirmation of faith;  
renewing the covenant made at their baptism.

Confirmands this morning making a new covenant;  
at least, renewing the covenant into which they were baptized.  
Saying publicly that God will be their God and that  
they will live as Christ-followers to the best of their ability.  
This is my faith. This is what I believe.

Tempting to make our confirmation day/today a graduation.  
Often, parents will commit their child to coming this far.  
Often, students will think that they are finished with their faith  
formation.

And yet, we are never finished being formed into God's image for us.  
Every experience,  
every class,  
every worship service,  
every service project,  
every ministry activity,  
is another small chisel stroke by our Master,  
shaping us more and more into the likeness of Christ.  
For, contrary to popular belief, **that** is the goal of our spiritual life.  
The goal is not to be "saved" to get to heaven when we die.  
The goal is to grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ.  
To die to ourselves, to our selfishness, to our will,  
so that when people look at us they really see Jesus.

Today isn't a graduation day for our confirmands;  
neither was it for you on the day you were confirmed.  
Confirmation Day is really an ordination day,  
the day when you're set apart for service in the world.  
You may not ever go on to seminary and become a pastor,  
though you might,  
But by virtue of our baptism, we are all called to be ministers  
sharing the love and compassion and hope  
we ourselves have first received from God.  
You can do that as a pastor,

or as a plumber, or as a nurse,  
or as a lawyer, or as a mechanic,  
or as a paramedic, or as a teacher,  
or as a homemaker, or as a member of the military,  
or as a police officer or fire fighter,  
or as a student or in **any** job you can imagine.

After today, may it be true for us as well.

Amen