

Pastor Joe Polzin
 John 10:11-18
 “Willing to Suffer All”
 Year B – Fourth Sunday of Easter
 April 22, 2018

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Today is a special day for many reasons. Today, is the fourth Sunday of Easter, as we continue to celebrate our Lord’s resurrection. Today is also generally known as Good Shepherd Sunday, when we celebrate Christ our Good Shepherd, and recognize, like we just sang, “The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never.”

But there’s another reason today is a very special day. Today, several of our young people from both Trinity and Mt. Hope will be confirmed. And like the explanation at the front of the bulletin says, Confirmation is the tradition when a Christian recognizes the faith that has been given to them by God in their Baptism, publicly declares it, and enters into their full and mature participation in the life of the church.

Now, during the rite of Confirmation, a couple interesting questions come up, and I drew our confirmands’ attention to it the past couple weeks. In just a short while, I’ll ask them some significant questions. But there are two in particular that stand out. The first is, “Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to *death*?” And the second is similar, “Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?”

It’s not often we get asked if we would rather suffer and die rather than give something up. For instance, no one ever asks you, “Do you intend to remain steadfast in your hobbies that you love, the sports you like to play, the books you like to read, the food you eat, and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from them?” Those things just aren’t that important.

Of course, there *are* some things that are important enough to die for – our family and our country, for instance. But even with those, it’s not an everyday occurrence that people are asked to die for them. So, what about our faith? Thankfully, we still live in a country that generally doesn’t threaten our life because of our beliefs. But we should realize, it hasn’t always been that way.

Just look at the early church, the first Christians. Throughout the season of Easter, we traditionally replace our Old Testament reading with a reading from Acts, which is the history of the early church, those first Christians. And they constantly were at risk for losing their lives because of the faith in Jesus. They were arrested, beaten, threatened, and many lost their lives. All in an effort to stop them from proclaiming what Jesus had done for them.

We heard in our reading today Peter boldly proclaim that “there is salvation in no one else [but Jesus]... there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). And do you know what the Christians did immediately after that? Do you know what they did while the rulers were trying to scheme a way to silence them?

The Christians prayed to God, asking for the strength to continue doing what they were doing and saying what they were saying. They said to God, “Look upon [our enemies’] threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness” (Acts 4:29).

And guess what? God answered that prayer, and the Christians continued to proclaim the Gospel. And I think they were full aware that this answered prayer would lead many of them to their deaths. Because *if* they proclaimed God's Word with boldness, and they did, many people would work hard to silence them, even kill them. Those early Christians took seriously their resolve to suffer all for the faith they confessed, even death, rather than fall away from it.

So, what enabled them to pray such a prayer? What enabled them to make such a commitment to their faith? The answer was that they were willing to suffer all, even death, because they knew who Jesus was. They knew that he is the Good Shepherd.

They were there when Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). And later, Jesus said, "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again" (10:18).

And then they watched as Jesus did exactly that. He willingly laid down his life on the cross. The sheep were scattered, abandoning him, but he pressed on, so that he could offer himself as the sacrifice for the sins of his sheep.

And then they also watched as Jesus took up his life again. He did not stay in the grave. The Good Shepherd overcame sin and death and rose again on the third day. Which could only mean one thing about this Shepherd. Only one person has the authority to do what Jesus did: God Himself. Which means, Jesus is *Lord*. And as Peter said, "There is salvation in no one else... no other name under heaven... by which we must be saved."

The early Christians were willing to die for their faith because they had faith in the one who was willing to die for them. And not only die, but be raised again. And by doing so, he defeated death itself by his resurrection. And so, fellow Christians, we profess the only name worth professing, the only name by which we are assured of our eternal life, the name of Jesus Christ.

Confirmands, you will be professing his name here in just a couple minutes. And you are saying, as we all should be willing to say, that we would rather die than give up our faith in his name. The name that is above all names. The authoritative name of Jesus Christ.

However, the challenge today, like I mentioned earlier, is that we aren't often called upon to die for our faith. Think about the clarity those early Christians must have had in terms of what's truly important in life. If you're facing death for being a Christian, you're going to know pretty well that your faith is worth sacrificing your own life for.

But today, we can live out our faith in *comfort*, at no real risk of suffering or death. Despite our secular culture today, our nation is still nominally "Christian." And I'm not saying that's a bad thing. But it *can be* dangerous. It can lure us into a sense of security. It can make us *comfortable* in our faith. And when we're comfortable, we may be tempted to let our guard down. We may begin to let our lives of faith slide.

"Oh, it's not that important that I'm in church every week." Or, "God knows I believe in Him, it doesn't matter if I'm involved in the life of the church or not." Or, "I know God will forgive me for doing this or trying that, even though deep down, I know it's not what a Christian does."

One of our students, Evan, his Confirmation Verse is Ephesians 6:11, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil." And it's a perfectly appropriate verse for today. Because all the devil needs is for us to slowly put down the defenses God has equipped us with. All of the armor He gives us, things like His Word, His

Sacraments, being here in His Church on a regular basis. These are the things that protect us, and the devil *can't* breach them.

But when *we* willingly take off those pieces of armor, or fail to put them on entirely, the devil has us right where he wants us. He knows that it's only a matter of time before we don't take our faith in Jesus as seriously as we ought to. And though we may *say* we'd be willing to die for our faith, nothing in our lives actually shows that we mean what we say. Over time our faith weakens, and we may even one day realize we've lost it entirely.

I bring all this up because I want you to know, Confirmands, that today is the day that your faith is now yours. You should thank your parents and grandparents and sponsors for raising you in the faith. It's the greatest gift you could have received from them. But now your faith is not theirs. It's yours. And what you're confessing today, what you're proclaiming here is literally a matter of life or death. Because it's a matter of eternal life or death.

I've shared with you many times that Confirmation is not a *finish* line, as if you're graduating today and now you're done with "church stuff." Rather, it's a *starting* line. It's the moment you're saying you're going to be a part of the family of God, the flock of God, with Jesus as your Shepherd. It's the moment you verbally confess that when it comes time for your life here on earth to end, that because you've been given faith in only name under heaven by which we are saved, that you will be granted eternal life in Jesus.

And brothers and sisters in Christ, we should all be listening today. Listen to the statements of faith these Confirmands will say. Listen to their confession of faith. Listen to the answers of the questions I'll be asking them. And answer them in your own heart as well.

This is an important moment for all of us, and especially for [the five of] you. In fact, this is the most important moment of your life. It's the most important moment of all our lives. Because it's always important whenever we answer the question, who is Jesus? Is Jesus *really* the risen and eternal Lord? Was he *really* raised from the dead, and does he *really* have the authority to raise *me* on the Last Day? And how you answer those questions can't help but dramatically transform the rest of your life.

And if all this makes today seem like a rather heavy moment, then good. Because it is. But there's also some really good news. Because Jesus *is* Lord. He really *does* have the authority over death and life itself. And he really is *your* Good Shepherd, who has already provided you the faith to believe and profess his name, which we will witness in just a few moments.

Jesus has already made you one of his sheep. And your Shepherd has already shown you what kind of love he has for you, that he willingly laid down his life for you, and that he also has the authority to pick it back up again.

And this means, whether *you're* called upon to lay down your life for Jesus in a moment of public confession, even die for him, or whether you're called upon live a long and faithful life professing the name of Jesus, you *will* be able to, because your Good Shepherd has given *you* the assurance of eternal life in his name, and steadfast love for *you*. He has made you His sheep, and surely His goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life, and you *will* dwell in the house of the Lord forever. In Jesus' name.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.