

Confirmands, can I tell you something really important? This is NOT your graduation. Parents, can I tell you something really important? This is NOT your kids' graduation. Yes, there will be parties, family celebrations, and special meals. There will be cards, gifts, and pictures. You even get to wear a robe. But this is NOT your spiritual graduation.

Because graduations have a sense of finality. Graduation means, "I'm done with this school, this class, this subject matter. I leave all this behind as I move on to other things." So let me reiterate. Confirmation is NOT your spiritual graduation.

I say that because I'm certain none of you woke up this morning thinking, "I'm at a critical point in my spiritual life right now." You thought about your hair, or wrestled with a tie, and hopefully brushed your teeth. But I doubt you looked in the mirror, thinking, "Satan is angry, because this morning, 34 young people will confess their faith in Jesus, and promise to follow him for the rest of their lives." But he is angry. And when Satan gets angry, he doesn't give up. He goes to work.

Maybe that sounds pretty heavy for a happy Confirmation celebration. And it is heavy. But it's necessary. Because right now, as I look at you, I can picture a number of students I've confirmed-- who sat in those same seats, wore those same robes, made the same promises you're about to—who left the church. Who disconnected from Jesus. Who starved the faith they confessed on Confirmation by refusing to feed it in worship and study.

You're at a crucial spiritual crossroads in your life. And how you view your Confirmation has a profound effect on what path you'll take at that intersection. Is Confirmation your spiritual **graduation**? If so, then after today, your spiritual life shifts off your radar, and most likely out of your life completely eventually. Or is Confirmation just part of your spiritual **continuation**? If so, then the faith you've been cultivating will remain a priority the rest of your life. My dear young friends, this is NOT your graduation. This church, this Word, this faith is not something you finish and leave behind. The question for Confirmation is not "Are we done?" But rather, "What comes next?" **To Whom Shall We Go?**

For Jesus' disciples, everything seemed perfect. They were there when Jesus miraculously fed over 5,000 people with a few loaves of bread and some fish. They'd traveled with Jesus as the crowds that followed him grew larger. They were the most trusted disciples of the most famous teacher in Israel. Life was downright joyful!

That is, until Jesus started teaching things that people didn't like. When he was filling their stomachs and healing the sick, the crowds flocked, even plotting to forcefully make him their king. But when Jesus stopped giving them miracle bread, and started teaching, "***I am the Bread of Life,***" claiming that he had "***come down from Heaven to give life to the world,***" instructing the people that they needed to feast on the true bread which "***is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world***" things started to change.

Suddenly, the crowds that had sprinted after him took a step back, thinking, "Isn't this Joseph and Mary's son? Now he's claiming to be from Heaven; that he's God's Son? And he wants us to eat his flesh?" Those who wanted Jesus to be king now wanted him to get away from him. "***On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"***"

In Catechism class, we've learned about some of the Bible's "hard teachings." Things like the Triune God. Or the Real Presence of Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion. Or the dual nature of Christ. Things we can only understand by faith, not reason.

However, when these disciples called Jesus' teachings "hard," they didn't mean hard to understand. The Greek word they used means "dried out" like the sun baked ground in a desert; or "rough," like an itchy wool sweater. Basically, Jesus' teachings rubbed them the wrong way, because they didn't suit people's desires. "***Many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.***" Jesus' twelve disciples, who had been overjoyed as great crowds flocked to their Master, now saw the crowds turning away from Jesus.

Pretty similar to the crowds around us. Today, about 25% of American adults identify as “nones”—atheists, agnostics, or identifying with no specific religion. The Bible is increasingly viewed as outdated and out of touch with modern reality. Most church bodies across the country have declining membership, especially among young people, and more and more people are shedding the teachings of Jesus like an itchy wool sweater.

As Jesus watched those other disciples turn their backs and walk away, he turned to his closest disciples, called the Twelve, and asked, ***“You do not want to leave too, do you?”***

This morning, Jesus turns to you, the 34. As family, friends, or peers turn their backs and walk away from Jesus, he asks, “You don’t want to leave too, do you?” To whom will you go? There are really only two paths of the spiritual crossroads. “Will you follow Jesus?” Or will you follow yourself?

Any path other than Christ is taken by a person seeking to follow their own desires. Some people desire logic and natural causes, so they turn away from Christianity, with its many necessary supernatural or miraculous actions. Some reject God’s commandments, because they desire morality to be a personal choice made according to feelings, not determined by God. Some “graduate” from their spiritual life because they desire to focus on their career, family, education, or recreation, and church and Bible study just get in the way. How about you? To whom will you go? Will you continue to follow Jesus? Or will you follow your desires?

But let me point out something important. Do you notice what Jesus doesn’t do when the crowds turn away from him? He doesn’t change his message. He doesn’t drop to his knees and beg, “Guys, come back! I’ll say whatever you want if you’ll follow me!” If Jesus just wanted followers, he’d only say what people wanted to hear. But he doesn’t. Why not? Because Jesus knew only his Word could give people life. ***“The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”*** ***“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing.”***

Compare those paths. The Spirit, working through the gospel in Word and sacrament, gives LIFE! Both eternal life, and life here and now! But the flesh? The things of the world? They count for nothing. Right now, through faith in Jesus, you have life in this world, and the promise of eternal life. If Jesus and his Word gives us life, why would we want to follow anyone or anything else? It would be like a man lost in the desert turning away from the crisp, blue waters of an oasis, so he could instead have mouthfuls of sand. Or a starving woman trading in her loaves of bread for rocks. Why would you trade away life, for nothing? For death?

Even as the crowds abandoned Jesus, the Apostle Peter responded to Jesus’ question, ***“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”*** It was a beautiful confession of faith, and an easy decision for the Twelve. They could continue to follow Jesus, who gave them life, or they could abandon Jesus and have... death. Eleven out of those Twelve men would go on to be martyred or die in exile because of their faith in Jesus. Yet, they refused to abandon it.

Because even if everyone else stopped following Jesus, the disciples had seen Jesus’ power as he walked on water, turned water into wine, healed the sick, and raised the dead. They had personally experienced the life-giving power of God’s Word. They had faith in Christ, not because they were so smart, but because in grace and mercy, the Spirit had given them life by bringing them to faith in Jesus. As Jesus said, ***“No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.”*** Time and time again, they had witnessed Jesus’ power, the power of the Word, and God’s grace and mercy.

And so have you. You’re not here on your Confirmation, confessing your faith in Jesus because of your own wisdom or power. You’re here, because our God is gracious and merciful. Because God’s powerful Word brought you to faith in baptism, and has kept you in that faith as the Spirit continues to work on your heart as you grow in grace and knowledge.

We have life, because God mercifully sent Jesus to die the death we deserve. Because the ***“Holy One of God”*** lived as the holy substitute for undeserving sinners like us. And that, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, is what you have. You...have...life. Not “will have” life. But you have life right now!

It sounds simple—don't graduate from your spiritual life. Don't give it away. Don't move on from it. But as I said earlier, Satan hates your faith. He will do whatever it takes to make you turn away from Jesus. So how can you avoid being like those others? It's simple. Make sure that your Confirmation is a continuation, not a graduation. Even after you're done with Catechism classes, be in God's Word regularly. Be in worship regularly. Receive Communion regularly, so the Spirit will keep your connection to Jesus strong! Parents, don't let this be your child's spiritual graduation. Even if they aren't at Mount Olive school, or if you don't have to bring them on Wednesday afternoons anymore, continue bringing them church and Bible study. Have spiritual conversations at home. Pray together. Be an example of spiritual continuation for them to emulate. Stay connected to Jesus, because Jesus and his Word alone give you life like literally nothing else can.

I was reminded of that again two weeks ago when a Southwest Airlines 737 blew an engine at 32,000 feet. 150 people on that plane became very aware of their mortality as their plane began rapidly descending toward the ground. On that flight was WELS pastor Timothy Bourman and his wife Amanda. Listen to what Pastor Bourman felt and thought, assuming he was about to die. "I just said, Jesus, send your angels." "I knew...that my God was going to take care of me one way or another." He recorded a message for his daughters, the last message he thought he'd send them. In it, he said, "Never lose your faith in God. Jesus loves you, girls." While Pastor Bourman was indeed scared, he said, "I also knew that whatever God's plan for me was, I was going to be blessed either way." In life or in death, because of his faith in Jesus, Pastor knew he would have life.

And so can you. That faith is yours by grace, so that by faith in Jesus, life is yours. Never graduate from it, dear Confirmands. ***"To whom shall we go? To who else but Jesus? He has ***the words of eternal life.***"***