

WHAT DOES CONFIRMATION MEAN? NOW WHAT?

What is normally referred to as confirmation is actually designated as our "Affirmation of Baptism."

This is an important step in our spiritual journey because when most of us were baptized, we were infants and had no idea what was going on. The practice of infant baptism goes back to the early church when it was customary for whole households to be baptized when the head of the family, usually the father, decided that he was going to be baptized. This included family members, no matter what their age was, servants, and slaves. Yes, there was slavery in those days. It was a normal part of the social order. A good biblical example of an entire household being baptized can be found in Acts, chapter 16:25-34. On the basis of stories such as these, as well as theological reflection on the part of the church fathers, such as Saint Augustine, infant baptism became the norm in the church up to the time of the Reformation.

During the Reformation, some groups, referred to as Anabaptists because they re-baptized converts from Roman Catholicism, believed that baptism was appropriate only after a person made a confession of faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Obviously, only adults could make such confessions so the folks who come from this tradition, such as Baptists and Evangelicals, do not baptize infants. Martin Luther and other reformers such as John Calvin retained infant baptism.

For Lutheran and Reformed Christians, such as Presbyterians, baptism is understood in a more sacramental way. A sacrament is a ritual that communicates a promise from God using a physical element. Since the promise comes to us prior to our decision to accept it, a confession of faith is not necessary to receive the sacrament. In other words, one has to receive a promise before deciding to believe and trust it. For example, when two people get married, they exchange promises to be faithful to one another for the rest of their lives. They each trust and believe the promise they convey to one another and hopefully, live that out in their lives together.

In baptism, God promises to make us his very own children. This promise is unconditional and therefore does not depend on the person making a commitment to believe it. For this reason, because baptism is based on God's promise, not on our commitment or faith, Lutherans continue to practice infant baptism. When you were baptized, God promised that he would make you his child, and he gave you the gift of the Holy Spirit who, in turn, enables us to believe this and all of God's promises.

Therefore, confirmation is the time for us, after a period of instruction in the Christian faith, to affirm that we believe that promise. Accordingly, when you go through the service of Affirmation of Baptism, you will be asked several questions.

You will be asked to renounce sin and evil.

You will be asked to confess the Apostles Creed, which is a brief statement outlining what Christians believe about God.

You will be asked if you intend to:

- 1) Live among God's faithful people.
- 2) Hear the word of God and share the Lord's supper.
- 3) Proclaim the good news of God in Christ in word and deed.
- 4) Serve all people after the example of Jesus.
- 5) Strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

All of these are aspects of the faith you are saying "Yes" to. Because God has made you a child of God, you are saying you are committed to live as a child of God.

Making these promises is the heart of the confirmation service. Now that you are young adults, you are saying you wish to live out the promise God made to you in baptism. This is one way of saying that you now wish to own the Christian faith for yourself.

Confirmation then is not an ending. It's a beginning. From here on, you are taking responsibility to live as a child of God by fulfilling the promises you make in the service. For Christians, this means becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ: of accepting him as your Lord and Savior, and following him in lives of faith, hope and love.

Looking at the promises you will be making in the service, you might notice that they consist of activities that fall into two categories.

1) Activities that nourish your faith and life as a Christian. These include worship, hearing God's word, participating in the Lord's supper, and being a part of a Christian community. The word and sacrament are the means of grace: the ways in which your faith is nourished and strengthened. In worship, we also praise God and demonstrate our gratitude for what he has done for us. In the fellowship of other Christians, we are also strengthened and we learn how to show love for one another.

2) Activities of service to others. Christians are not called to isolate themselves from the world but to go out and become servants using the gifts God has given us. This includes financial gifts, volunteer work, and your vocation. Whether you are a plumber, a nurse, a software engineer, or a car mechanic, you are serving the needs of others and the community.

The important thing is that you not think of confirmation as a graduation. The church is not an educational institution where people come to learn about religion and then disappear after the program is completed. The church is the people of God who meet to praise and thank God, to hear his word and receive his sacraments so as to experience his grace and love for you; and it is a community of service whereby we can show love for our neighbor. It is the place where we gather to support one another in our common spiritual journey as disciples of Jesus Christ