

## **The Promise Is For You**

Acts 2:14-36-42

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Today is a special day for me. It is even more special for the youth who will be confirmed in just a few minutes. I really love confirmation. I love teaching. I love getting to know the youth who participate. I love how many adults are uplifted as they hear the youth share their statements of faith. Since late January, Chris Baker and I have been working together to try, however feebly, to help these fourteen young people learn something about the faith, history, and tradition of the church while at the same time helping them think spiritually about their own life and experiences. In some sense, confirmation is meant to be a sort of Pentecost moment – a moment when somehow, through the mystery of the Holy Spirit, these young people hear the good news about Jesus in their own language.

This sermon is mostly for those fourteen youth sitting out there among you. It is also for everyone else, though, to help the rest of you get to know these fourteen youth. They will answer the call today to live as Christ's faithful disciples. You, too, will answer a call to help them learn and grow and live as faithfully as possible. So you need to get to know them a little bit, and you might even learn a little bit from them, too.

The text we have from the book of Acts today is actually a Pentecost text. It is Peter's sermon to the crowd gathered on the day of Pentecost sermon. We use it during Easter because the sermon itself proclaims the good news of the crucified and risen Messiah. The Holy Spirit as just come through like a rushing wind and tongues of fire, enabling people of all different nations and languages to understand the Aramaic words of the apostles. Some of the people are receptive right away. Others are skeptical. Most are just plain confused. I suppose that something of an adequate description for confirmation. You gathered for a number of reasons – some of you out of genuine excitement and desire to learn, others because it seemed like the right thing to do or because your friends were coming, other because your mom or dad told you that it was time. Whether youth or adults, we often come to significant moments in life with mixed feelings and confused desires, not even sure if we are in the right place or how we got there to begin with.

You have made it through the wind-rush and fire-storm of confirmation. For twelve weeks you've been bombarded with information – some of it new, some more familiar, some challenging. Today is the big day! It is the day when you profess out loud in front of all these people your desire and commitment to be a follower of Jesus. It is quite possible that I have given you the idea that you are supposed to have it all figured out by now – that you know exactly what you believe and why and you could defend that belief in the face of any argument or attack. Maybe you are feeling nervous because you still do not know exactly what you believe. Maybe you are afraid that someone will question you about your faith, and you will not have the right answers. Maybe you are worried that your life does not quite measure up to what you say you believe.

I have two words for you: fear not. After the Holy Spirit rushed through, those first converts to Christ had no idea what had happened to them. Some people even wondered if the disciples were drunk – at nine o'clock in the morning! Those first 3,000 converts did not know everything they would ever need to know. They only knew they had witnessed something incredible and holy and that they had been “cut to the heart.” The mysterious presence of the Holy Spirit and Peter’s teaching opened their eyes to their own sinfulness and the incredible mercy of God.

Now, let me speak to all you adults gathered here for a moment. I have had several of you tell me that you need a confirmation class for adults – a time to learn all that stuff that you are supposed to know about God and Jesus and the church. And I think that’s a pretty good idea – one that I am still chewing on and thinking about how to act on. But I am also sure that you would finish a confirmation class for adults feeling no less certain about those gray areas of your faith than you do now. You might learn a few of the so-called right answers. You might come to understand why Presbyterians do certain things a certain way. You might even remember a thing or two that Steve or I would say in such a class. But just as it was not Peter’s teaching in and of itself that convinced those 3,000 to be converted to Christ, so it is no classroom learning alone that cuts to the heart and makes faithful disciples out of a bunch of confused and stumbling teens or grown-ups.

Most of the real growth that happens occurs when the Holy Spirit shows up in the regular places of life. You want to know about the Trinity? Look for those rare instances where selfless love works in perfect harmony with the other who loves selflessly in return. You want to understand atonement? Try forgiving someone who has betrayed or abandoned or otherwise failed you. Do you want to know if the Bible is really true? Read it and see where it speaks its truth into your life. Do you want to better understand the mystery of Christ’s presence at the Eucharist? Share your bread and your heart with someone who needs both. Do you want to know how prayer works? Pray.

These are the things the first converts did after they welcomed the message about Jesus, repented of their sins, and were baptized. In one fell swoop, the Holy Spirit came in and dazzled them with wondrous signs and convicting preaching. And the whole lot of them were at the same time amazed and perplexed. Amazed and perplexed. I am sure that is exactly how these fourteen youth are feeling: amazed that this day has arrived, thankful for the opportunity to profess their faith in Christ, but also perplexed about what this really means and how to integrate the last twelve weeks of confirmation with the rest of their life – past, present, and future. Have we not all felt this way as we have experienced the stir of the Spirit at various times in our lives?

The good news is that even though you profess your faith today or if you professed your faith long ago or if you are still thinking about professing faith in Christ, you do not have to know everything you will ever need to know. You do not have to know exactly what you believe about everything. You do not have to have all the right answers to every question. You simply come, amazed and perplexed and stirred by the Holy Spirit. The questions are answered not all at once or in any classroom but in the daily disciplines of living out your commitment to Jesus in community.

If there is one bit of knowledge that I hope you fourteen youth will remember, it is what we learned together about the church. On the day we studied the church, I asked you each to share, off the top of your head, a definition for “church.” I listed your definitions on the white board, and almost every one of them started with the words, “a place that . . .” We read several different verses in Scripture and finally learned together that the church is not a place at all. The church is all the people of God – past, present, and future. And you do not have to look at the people of God for very long to see that we are pretty regular people. None of us are perfect. Few of us are certain of everything we believe. I cannot think of anyone who knows all the answers to every question about God and Jesus and faith. All of us are alternately and all at the same time perplexed and amazed and wanting to learn more and not sure if we really do want to know more at all.

If you are feeling a little nervous today about standing up here in front of all these people, that’s okay. It is a lot of people and it is probably normal to be nervous. But if you are feeling a little nervous about professing your faith in Jesus because you are not totally sure how you got here or what you believe or if you life is good enough, fear not. Even if you are not among these fourteen who will stand up to profess their faith, but you are still a little nervous because you are not totally sure how you got here or what you believe or if you life is good enough, fear not. Today is not the day for all the answers. Today is the day for letting the Holy Spirit move in you and through you. Today is the day for devoting yourself, like those first 3,000 converts, not to a place or even to a set of knowledge, but to Jesus who loves you without condition and to a community of equally amazed and perplexed disciples. Thanks be to God.