

“Limitation, Affirmation & Participation.” Pastor Fritz Wiese. 21 April 2024. Confirmation Day at COS

Well today is a super day. We are really proud of our six young adults who are saying YES to their faith journeys in a special way. They've done a super job of putting together a video of their life verses they've selected along with some faith statements.

And as we get ready to listen to those in a moment, let me complement their reflections with a few others, perhaps coming from all their older brothers and sisters in Christ. For I think the older you get, the more one realizes this day known as CONFIRMATION is a multi-layered confirmation.

First, let me suggest first that today is a confirmation of our limitation. You young men and women look so great today. Fantastic. Ah, the delight of youth. When I was in high school, I was playing tackle football with some friends and a buddy's head collided with my mouth. And ever since my one tooth is a little darker than the other. My teeth will certainly never be invited to be used for a Colgate or Crest commercial. Then in college, while rubbing my hair while studying, I realized that the expanding forehead gene from my mother's side might be in my bloodstream. What? I'm ashamed to admit it, but the ornery youngster Fritz might have called a classmate or two 4-eyes in elementary school. And now I'm the one struggling with cheaters all over my office and printing out my sermon in 18 size-font to make sure I can see, when I'm not asking someone to repeat themselves because my hearing is starting to go after mowing so many lawns as a kid with no ear protection. Oh, and did I mention my Mohs surgery on my nose to remove a precancerous spot due to the sins of my youth with no sun-screen or how I have to actually stretch before and after exercise after a few trips to the chiropractor. I never thought as a youth that I would be included as the part of humanity whose bodies are limited at some point. 😊

And maybe I can't speak for all the confirmands today who are celebrating their 20th, 50th, or 70th anniversary of confirmation, but those physical limitations have parallels in my spiritual and behavioral limitations. Here's how one member of the very first confirmation class, Peter, put it. “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.” Confirmands, from your digging into Scripture, you've learned how Peter was one of Jesus' key disciples. When Jesus

asks everyone “who do you say I am,” it’s Peter who bravely says “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Yet, in crunch time, when Jesus has been arrested, what comes from Peter’s mouth is not testimony, but denial—3 times!

Or how about Paul? Some of you confirmands did the traditional 3 years of confirmation class and some of you took another route. Well, Peter did the 3 years of traveling with Jesus’ program. But Paul went the Plan B route, as you might know. The Holy Spirit taps this Christian-hunter and commissions him instead to be a Christian-multiplier. Yet, here’s what Paul confirms after years of trying to be faithful for Jesus. “¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7)

Is that true for anyone else here? Have you ever told yourself, “I’ll never say that again.” But then the next week, in an argument, you hear yourself—maybe changing the words a bit—but basically saying the same thing. You look at your behavior or reaction and say, “that is not the person I want to be!” But even though I don’t want it, I do it.

How many of you are still battling 1000 on your new year’s resolutions here on April 21? Right, I don’t see any hands. Because we realize that no matter how hard we try to will our way into better behavior, or happiness, or into the next level of Christian performance, we just can’t do it on our own. Some of you remember the awesome musical from a few years back, *Wicked*, and one of the characters is singing a song about how she is limited. That is us on days like today—or at least it’s me. Today is a confirmation that I am LIMITED—physically, morally, behaviorally, and spiritually.

Now here’s an extra danger. We live in a world today where maybe it’s easier than ever before to despair in our limitation. You young people are amazing, because with God’s grace, you’re figuring out how to appropriately interact with social media. But knowing the stats, and how hard it is for the old-folks to deal with, I can only imagine the emotions you guys feel.

For instance, you’ve heard this before. From 2007 to 2019 (so this doesn’t even factor in the impact of Covid), the proportion of college students with prescriptions for antidepressants or anti-anxiety medication

essentially doubled.¹ One of the theories is that we live in a curated world of media where it SEEMS like everyone else has it all together. In commercials and on social media, we see people who LOOK like they've figured out how to have plenty of friends, travel where they want, and look beautiful all the time. They seem Unlimited, and then we get depressed, because we struggle and beat ourselves up in comparison. I love how author Ann Lamott succinctly advises, "Everyone is screwed up, broken, clingy, and scared, even the people who seem to have it more or less together. They are much more like you than you would believe. So, try not to compare your insides to their outsides." (Repeat)

Now here's the good news. If today's confirmation service involves our confirmation of our limitation, it's also Jesus' confirmation of his affirmation of US! The Good News is that we don't have to fake it with Jesus. We don't have to try to hide our limitations and struggles and doubts from Jesus, because he already knows. Like that series of creative commercials out there, "He Gets Us." Sometimes, I wish he didn't get us so much. Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, where Jesus refers to himself as a Shepherd which means what? WE are sheep.

Part of my struggle is that I want to be an soaring eagle, not a dumb sheep. I wish we were bears or lions who get to stomp around wherever we want, because we have life all figured out. Jesus could be Falconer and we could be the Falcons. No NFL football team is going to call themselves "the sheep," right? But Jesus, knowing us in love, and maybe with a chuckle, calls us sheep but promises that he will shepherd us.

Let's take a look at this clip of a shepherd and sheep. (Shepherd rescues sheep from ditch, but then sheep runs and jumps right back into ditch).

Is that us? It's me sometimes. And maybe we have to laugh at ourselves a bit. Absolutely there are moments when we soar like eagles and run like cheetahs. And indeed, I tried to have the highest grade point average, gain admission to the best schools, and marry the prettiest girl—and I hope you go for it too. But how amazing to know that when we inevitably bumble around like sheep, Jesus will be patient with us, love us, call us, take care of us, find us, rescue us, and lead us—together—where we need to go.

¹ Marcia Morris, use of psychiatric medication by college students, pharmacotherapy, 41.

I've got a buddy who sends me from time to time the scripture of the day that pops up on his phone. And as I was writing this sermon yesterday morning, he sends me this: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV) Exactly. We are limited, but God is not. That's Lutheran Christianity right there. It's not by OUR behavior we're saved, but by Jesus'. So, pressure is off and we get to enjoy life, breathing grace. Life is no longer a "have to." It's a "get to."

In communion each week, we hear Jesus explain how he feeds us: "This cup is a new covenant, in my blood, shed for the gathering of all American Christian Gladiators or any other Christian nationalists from various countries around the world? No. Shed for the unification of all Perfect People or those obey 72% of the 10 Commandments most days or listen to Christian radio half the time? No. For Super Christians or those who fib they don't have doubts, skepticism, and struggles as they follow Jesus? Nope. Jesus said his cup is for the forgiveness of sin. In other words, Jesus wants to eat with sinners and strugglers. Those who do their best, but still are broken and battered and betray our Savior—like Judas, Peter, and Thomas-- more than we ever want to admit.

So on days like this, we praise Jesus for declaring in Luke 5 "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." And that he comes not to "call the righteous, but sinners to repent." To turn in a new direction and find grace in him.

I love how Joseph Agada puts it, as you will hear in just a moment: he doesn't have to worry too much for "God's plans for me are greater than anything I can conjure." Amen.

So, friends, we celebrate that today, amid our confirmation of our limitation, we hear Jesus' confirmation of his affirmation of us, limited and struggling as we are. It's not about us being good, but our God being great. And finally, let me wrap up with this idea: today is also about the Holy Spirit's confirmation of YOUR participation.

In just a moment, your families will gather around you, and on behalf of the church, I'll lay hands on you and we'll ask, in Jesus' name, that the Holy

Spirit keep empowering you, in your baptismal identities and journeys, with spiritual gifts to equip you to be Jesus' light for the world.

Ben White, I love how you emphasized the Fruits of the Spirit. You might remember a few years ago, our whole Lenten series unpacked this promise about Fruitful Living. God wants to use each one of us to make the world a better place each day by blossoming the fruits of love, peace, patience, understanding, joy, self-control and more wherever we go. And we don't have to stress about how we manufacture those on our own. But simply confirm/affirm to the Lord each day that you are willing to participate in Jesus' resurrection agenda.

Let's remember. Jesus says he is the vine and we are the branches. So, we do want to stay CONNECTED to Jesus and connected to each other. And when we're connected, the Holy Spirit will work with you, flow through you, co-produce with you the fruit that will grow in your hearts, minds, spirits, schedules, careers, relationships and families throughout your lives! Fruit that will make the world delicious. Not necessarily happy all the time or without pain and sadness. Or without calls to courage and conviction. Let's remember, our Leader died on a cross working for justice. But the Christian pathway is fruitfully delicious indeed.

So much more we could say. But isn't it fantastic today that we don't commission you to go out into the world to be super Christians or perfect people. We invite you, confirmands, to join the rest of us in saying no to the anxiety and judgment of the world so we can say yes to Jesus' love and grace. That in our willingness to confess and laugh at ourselves a bit, along with Peter and Paul, making a confirmation of our limitation in sin, we get to hear Jesus' affirmation of us as a flock of participation as he wants to lead to greener pastures. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Now let's take a look at this video!

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