

The Feast of Pentecost & Youth Confirmation, Sunday, May 19, 2024

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

The Holy Spirit Comes

John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15

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

Eph 1:2

In our reading from the Gospel of St. John, Jesus said: **“When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come”** (16:13)

As we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit today, we’ve also gathered for the confirmation of six youth: Luis, Matthew, Nora, Mary, Kali, and Landon. What is confirmation and why does it matter? One pastor described the importance of confirmation instruction like this: He said, “[It] should make the young people spiritually independent, so that they would stand on the foundation that remains immovable when the earth and heavens shake.”¹ Religious instruction, he believed, made the difference between children who could consciously express their Christian faith and those who had only a “cultural” attachment to Christianity.

We share that same aim: For the six of you to be spiritually independent. That means having a Christian faith that belongs to you and is yours for the rest of your life. It’s not enough that your parents and grandparents believe, though I’m glad they do. It’s not enough that you believed once when you were a child. We want each of you to believe for yourself—now until the day you die—to own the Christian faith as yours and for your whole life to be shaped by it. So hold and keep this Christian faith that’s been given to you from Holy Scripture and taught in the Small Catechism. Stand on the immovable foundation, the rock that is Jesus Christ, your Lord. He can never be shaken. Though the world changes, and your world will certainly change, He remains the same—**yesterday, today, and forever** (Heb 13:8). What you have in Him is solid and certain. It’s trustworthy and true. Even when the earth and heavens shake, and they will, your God and His word will remain unshaken.

¹ Matthew Heise, *The Gates of Hell: An Untold Story of Faith and Perseverance in the Early Soviet Union* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press), 114. For more detail about confirmation in the early Soviet Union, see pages 113–114..

But back to that statement about confirmation instruction—it “should make the young people spiritually independent, so that they would stand on the foundation that remains immovable when the earth and heavens shake.” Those words come from Pastor Johann Völl. Pastor Völl served as a Lutheran pastor in Ukraine in the 1920s. That was during the early Soviet Union. The Soviet government had made a law forbidding religious instruction for groups of children under the age of eighteen. Two days before Pastor Völl was to confirm a new group of students, he was called into the Communist Party headquarters for a five-hour cross-examination. They informed him that he was only allowed to teach younger children and no more than three at a time—a challenge for a pastor who usually confirmed two hundred youth each year. The Communist government knew the truth: teaching the Christian faith makes Christians. By forbidding the teaching of the Christian faith, or making it really difficult, their hope was to raise a generation of atheists. The stakes were high. They still are. When the earth and heavens shake—Pastor Völl himself ended up either exiled or in a gulag for his Christian faith. So do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it? By the grace of God, we say, by the grace of God, yes!

So confirmation isn't only a religious ceremony or a rite of passage. It's far more. For these six, it's the culmination of a year dedicated to the study of God's word and the teachings of the Christian faith. Before ascending to heaven, Jesus commissioned the Church to do the work of making disciples of all nations. How? By baptizing them in the Triune name and **“teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”** (Mt 28:20). Teaching is the point of confirmation. It's one way the Church hands on the faith from generation to generation. But don't misunderstand. Confirmation is *not* graduation. You're not done. This isn't like some other classes where you take a test, put the book away, and never think about it again. Always keep learning and studying the faith. Turn off the TV. Stop scrolling your phone. Wear out your Bible and your Small Catechism instead. If they fall apart, I'll buy you another. Every day die to sin and rise to walk in newness of life with Jesus through Holy Baptism. Come confessing your sin and hear that sweet, sweet absolution: all forgiven for Jesus' sake. Keep meeting together at the Divine Service, and receive the body and blood of your Lord—not once a year or twice a year but week after week after week. God knows you need it.

For this is where the breath of the Spirit blows. This is how the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, the Helper sent by Jesus from the Father, breathes life and strength and hope into dry and dusty bones. The Spirit set the prophet Ezekiel in the middle of a valley filled with dry bones and asked him, **“Can these bones live?”** What kind of question is that!?! Can dry bones live? Really? Can they love? Can they trust? Can they hope? Can they bear joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control? **“O**

Lord God, You know—You alone” (Ezek 37:3). That’s right! He knows. That’s what matters. True, dry bones by themselves can’t do jack squat. And some of you sitting here today may feel like a pile of dead bones. You may see death close at hand. Your hope may be going, going, gone. But the real question isn’t how hopeless you are or how sick you are or how dead you are. The real question is: Can the dead be raised? Can those who died of dementia or perished in prison camps be raised? Can they stand on their feet—today, tomorrow, on the Last Day? Because if the answer to any of those is “yes,” then it doesn’t matter how dry the bones are. It doesn’t matter how long they’ve been like that. It doesn’t matter if sickness plagues us or if the world mocks us. I’m not saying it’s easy. I’m saying those things aren’t forever. **“Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live!”** (Ezek 37:9). So Ezekiel prophesied, **the breath came, they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army** (Ezek 37:10). Behold, a host!

Thus says the Lord GOD: You shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O My people. And I will put My Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD (Ezek 37:12, 13–14).

“I will put My Spirit within you.” His breath will enter us. It came like a mighty rushing wind on the Day of Pentecost. The disciples **were all together in one place** (Acts 2:1). That’s reason enough for us to gather each Sunday. And that’s when the promise of the Father came: **Divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit** (Acts 2:3–4a). What happened then? They told about **the mighty works of God** in languages people could understand (Acts 2:11). They spoke about Jesus. They declared His suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. They made known His blood as atonement, covering for all sin. This is what they prophet Joel had promised: the Spirit would be poured out **and it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved** (Joel 2:28 // Acts 2:21). Dear confirmands, you’ve been taught to call upon the name of the Lord, so don’t ever be afraid to call upon Him—to ask Him for help and guidance; to pray for His name to be kept holy, His kingdom to come, and His will to be done in your life; to ask for daily bread, forgiveness, aid in temptation, and deliverance from evil. You’ve been taught to confess Jesus as Savior, and you’ll make that confession again today before God and this congregation, knowing that Jesus has promised to confess you as His own before His Father in heaven.

The Holy Spirit comes. He breathes on you through God’s word. He descends on you through Holy Baptism. He enters you through Holy communion. His is poured out on

you again and again. May He fill our bodies, making them His temple. May He take over our tongues—not that we would speak in other languages, but rather that our words would be holy, building others up, so that the name of Jesus would be on our lips in our own language. May He inspire our minds, that we would think only what is good, true, and beautiful.

Jesus said: **“When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come”** (v 13). We pray that Jesus would continue to do as He has promised: Send the Spirit from His Father to convict us of sin, bestow His righteousness on us through faith, and judge the ruler of this world. We don’t know what tomorrow will bring, but He knows. The Spirit, through Holy Scripture, will guide. He teaches us what is true. He will be the Comforter, the Helper, the Advocate you need as you go through life. When the earth and heavens shake, He will help us stand firm, for His word will not pass away. Jesus is risen, ascended, and coming again. The Spirit testifies to us of these things. We have received **a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire** (Heb 12:28–29). Our God—a holy, purifying fire of love and life, unshakeable and unshaken, Father, Son, and blessed Holy Spirit.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
