

### **“The Tested Genuineness of Your Faith”**

In the name of him who was slain for sin, rose again, and has been exalted to the right hand of God, dear friends in Christ: Let me begin with a question for you to consider: What would you say is the most valuable thing the Lord has given to you? Think about it. What is it that the Lord has entrusted to your care and keeping that matters more than anything else? It's a question well worth pondering because something *that* important ought to be vigilantly guarded and carefully preserved and maintained, don't you think? Of course: if it's the most valuable thing you have, you'd better be making sure that it gets top priority in your life.

But what is it? Well, let's see: we're all materialistic Americans, so when I spoke of value, you may immediately have thought in terms of *monetary* value. In which case you'd have thought about the thing you've got – whatever it is – that's worth the most money; maybe your home, or the family farm, or what you've got saved up for retirement, or I don't know, maybe someone has a chest full of jewels or a gallery of famous paintings stashed away. That may have been your *initial* thought; but if so, it probably didn't last long. Upon reflection you'd have said to yourself, “No, he's a pastor preaching a sermon. And the Bible says that life is worth so much more than the things we manage to accumulate.” In your heart you know it's true. Stuff comes and goes. And plenty of people who are rich in terms of worldly wealth are still pretty miserable while others who possess very little seem to get along just fine. So it's obvious that there are things in life worth much more than what money can buy.

Well, okay, having discarded that notion, we all know that people are more valuable than things; so if you're married, then you might say that your spouse is the most valuable thing the Lord has given you. Parents might say that their children are. And I won't deny that our human relationships rank very high among the greatest treasures the Lord grants to us; but I'm certain that there is something worth far more still. What could it be? Your intellect and ability to reason? Your health? Your body? Your very life on this earth? All these too are precious gifts of God. And without some of them you certainly couldn't have any meaningful relationships with others. So yes, they are all important. They're all quite valuable; but they are not what is the most important and most valuable—not by a long shot.

What is? Listen carefully: there is nothing the Lord God has given to you that is more valuable than your faith in Jesus Christ the Savior. That you believe that Jesus of Nazareth, true God and true man, lived a perfect life on your behalf, suffered and died for your sin, rose again on the third day, and that through him you have the forgiveness of sin and everlasting life with God—*this* is what matters most – and should be what matters the most *to you* – because this is the gift of God that determines your eternal destiny. Without this gift, if you don't have it, or if you had it at some point and then lost it through your neglect of it, through your willful rejection of it, or through your ongoing and unrepentant sin, then you will without doubt spend eternity in the torments of hell. Then it won't matter one little bit what you owned, whom you loved, what you did, how well you did it, or how healthy or happy you were. You will be damned forever. But if you have this gift, if you cherish it, nourish it, confess it, and zealously guard and keep it, then no lasting harm can ever befall you. You already have life eternal and nothing can snatch you from your Savior's hands. And when this fallen world passes away you will receive the inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, which is being kept in heaven for you. Indeed, by faith, you already possess it.

This is why your faith in Jesus Christ is the most valuable thing the Lord has given you. And this is what we are thanking the Lord for and celebrating today: the gift of faith the Lord has instilled in all of us; and in particular, the gift of faith that the Lord has by the power of his Holy Spirit implanted and caused to grow in the two young people who are being confirmed today. We are praising God for the faith given to them in Baptism – or through the Word of God prior to and subsequently enriched by Baptism; and for their faith fed and nourished over the years, their faith more recently developed and fine-tuned through the confirmation classes that led up to this day, and their faith which we will in short order hear them confess.

As the family of God it's right that we rejoice in this. Possessing the gift of faith in Jesus Christ as we do and knowing its incalculable value, we enjoy nothing as much as seeing the tangible evidence that someone else possess this treasure also – particularly if that someone happens to be close to us: a daughter or son, a grandchild, or other close family member. I have no doubt that many prayers are being answered today; prayers by parents, grandparents, sponsors, and others (including myself), who have earnestly entreated the Lord to ground these two daughters of God firmly in the faith and to give them the foundation upon which to build a Christian life. And not only have we been praying, we've also been serving as the Lord's instruments in making it happen – by bringing them to Baptism and to the Church where the Holy Spirit works through the Word, through teaching, through family devotions and prayers, through equipping them with the tools: the Holy Scriptures, the Catechism, and with other age appropriate devotional books over the years, and also by the example of our own lives. In these ways the Lord has been using us together with the whole family of God to bring them to where they are today: ready, willing, and able to confess with boldness the faith once delivered to the saints and through which they too will be crowned with glory when Jesus Christ is revealed. For all of this, for what the Lord has done for them and through us, it's only fitting that we rejoice with overflowing gratitude in our hearts to God.

But I hasten to add that Confirmation is not so much about what *has* happened as what is yet to happen. It is for us Lutherans only a milestone on the journey of the Christian life; it's not the end or the goal. It may be helpful to think of it this way: when I was in the Army, I had a commander who used to say that an award was given in view of service already performed; but a promotion was granted in view of demonstrated potential. That is to say a promotion to a greater rank indicates that your superiors think you're ready to take on more responsibility. With that in mind, it's better to think of Confirmation less like an award the church grants to those who have come to a certain point in the development of their faith, and more like a promotion – not that upon Confirmation one comes to a higher level of Christianity – but that having been prepared and guided by others, upon Confirmation the Christian takes on more responsibility for him or herself.

What I mean is this: up until now the responsibility for overseeing the implantation and growth of the faith of these being confirmed today has largely fallen on the shoulders of others – chiefly their parents who brought them to Baptism and who have since brought them to the services of God's house and ensured their thorough instruction in the doctrines of Christ. My guess is that they haven't had much choice in the matter – at least, there were times during their instruction that it seemed that way to me. But they are transitioning to adulthood. In a few years, they'll be on their own. And when that time comes, their faith will be put to the test. Then it will become apparent whether the faith they confess today is genuine.

You see, it's one thing to know the facts of the faith: Who the Triune God is, who Jesus is, what did he for sinners on the cross, why he was raised from the dead, that he's coming again to judge all people, what the Church is and how the Holy Spirit works through it to build up

the body of Christ in Christian faith and life, and so on. It's quite another thing to *trust* in these assertions—which is what faith is: not just head knowledge of data, but knowing the person of Jesus Christ and being confident that what the Bible declares and the Church confesses about him is true and reliable. It's being certain that his promises are trustworthy. It's taking a stand upon them even in the face of adversity and opposition.

The former, the facts of the faith, have been tested in these two. I made sure of that myself. They know the right answers. They can say the right things. But the *genuineness* of their faith has yet to be tested. And it will be – every day from here on. To be sure, what is happening today is a small part of that testing. I've no doubt that they are both very much aware that the spotlight is on them, and that they are a bit apprehensive because of it. In that sense they are being placed under some stress on account of their faith, and they will make their confession under a degree of discomfort. But it's a relatively low hurdle. We who have gathered here are looking forward to hearing them confess the name of Jesus. We encourage it. We're more like the home crowd cheering on their favorite local team.

But the days are coming when confessing their faith won't be so easy. They'll make their confession under a lot more stress. You know Peter and the disciples all confessed their undying devotion to Jesus in the upper room where things were comparatively safe and secure. They said they'd never leave him. But when Jesus was arrested, they all fled. And Peter three times denied he even knew the Lord. That became his confession in the face of opposition: "I don't know Jesus." None of the disciples was as faithful as he thought he was or claimed to be. But how very different they are in today's first reading from the Book of Acts. Now they take their stand before the same council that condemned Jesus to death. They know the same thing could happen to them. They don't care. They have a perfect sense of security that comes from *trusting* Jesus. They have no fear of what may happen: suffering, pain, death – it means nothing to them because they know the One who endured all suffering for them and who defeated death. And they know what he has promised to do for them. Told to be silent, they refuse to stop proclaiming Jesus as Savior. And then having been stripped, beaten, and admonished again to stop proclaiming Christ, we're told that they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Jesus]. And understand that they weren't rejoicing because they had been beaten and abused; but rather because the Lord gave them a faith strong enough to endure it. It proved the genuineness of their faith. It showed them that their faith was truly grounded on and in Jesus and not in their own weak minds, hearts, and wills

That's what the trials of faith that lie ahead of all of us demonstrate one way or another. And these trials come from all sides in all manner of things. Some come from our own weak and sinful flesh, which tells us that we can go it alone, that our faith is already strong enough and doesn't need to be fed and cared for. It tells us that we don't need the ongoing ministry of Christ's Church and the means of grace to continue to build us up in faith. Other trials come from the world, which makes fun of what we believe and tries to shame us into denying or hiding our faith. Other times we may face open opposition and violence as many Christians are right now throughout the world. And some trials come from Satan, who, as we just sang, seeks to rob us of this treasure. He does it through temptations to sin and by inflicting hardships that cause us to doubt the love and promises of God. Think of Job and how Satan tried to shake his faith in the Lord.

But the thing to see is that ultimately it is the Lord who gives us these trials, not to harm us, but to show us where we stand. They are the fires that refine what is far more valuable than gold in us. Each and every test proves the genuineness of faith. If we are able to stand, good;

it means we ought to continue on in what we're doing. If not, we know it's time to repent, to change what we're doing, and to draw closer to Christ who gives and strengthens faith by his Word and Sacraments. That's how the disciples changed from only mouthing the right words to holding a genuine faith: they spent time with the risen Lord. They received his forgiveness. From him they received the Holy Spirit. And then they continued fellowshiping with each other, studying Jesus' teachings and the Scriptures, partaking in the Lord's Supper, and praying together. This is how their faith became genuine – the real faith that stands up when tested. And in this same way we can ensure the genuineness of our own faith. Then it will be the kind of faith that results in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; who, though we have not seen, we love. And though we do not see him now, we believe in him, and we rejoice with a joy that is inexpressible and that fills us with glory; for we are obtaining the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***