

John 21:1-14

Sixty years ago a class of young confirmands knelt before God's altar here in this church. While that's not so remarkable in itself, what is remarkable is that after sixty years they are still gathering before the altar of God. After grandparents, and then parents, who set the example, have died and entered their rest, for the children to continue holding fast the sacred Word and the habit of receiving the Lord's body and blood, is none other than the work of the Holy Spirit alone. If character is the measure of what we do when no one is watching, then Christian character is exemplified in those who walk in the footsteps of the saints who have gone before them even though those saints are not around to watch and observe them. One of the easiest things for a confirmed Christian to do is to shed the clothing of their catechism as quickly as possible. The statistics are quite revealing. Only one out of every four confirmands in the Lutheran Church is an active member when they are adults.

Today's Gospel reading sheds some light on all of this for us. It wasn't Confirmation Day; it was Easter. Just a few weeks earlier the disciples had seen the Risen Lord, on two different occasions. But now what? They were back home up north. The angel had said that Jesus would meet them in Galilee, but it wasn't happening. Never one to sit still, Peter said, "I'm going fishing." The others said, "We will go with you." It was a good diversion. It relaxed their minds. It paid the bills. But not this night. There were no fish. It had happened before, but back then Jesus had saved the day. At His command they caught so many fish that it took two boats to haul them in. But now Jesus was nowhere to be seen. For three years they had been with Him constantly. But those days were over.

A stranger called out from shore, "Do you have any fish?" "No," they called back. "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." The man was three hundred feet away, but they listened to him, and their net was so full of large fish that they could not even haul them in. And that's when John said it. The four little words which plunged Peter into the water. The four little words which keep Confirmation Classes coming back to the altar time after time. The four little words which are the answer to all of our searching questions, which separate the sheep from the goats, and which give us peace and joy in the midst of life's troubles. We're not told if John shouted these words or if he simply said them matter-of-factly. It didn't matter. What he said was true--true then and true today. His words? "It is the Lord."

"It is the Lord." It dawned on him, for God's Spirit revealed this to him, that this was no stranger on the shore; it was Jesus. It was the Lord. Peter reacted without hesitation. Stripped for work, he put on his garments and dove into the water. He was no Michael Phelps, but he out swam the boat. Coming up onto the land he would have been a sight. Exhausted, soaked...his clothes clinging to his body...anybody watching all the goings-on would have chuckled at him. But Peter didn't care. It was the Lord, his Lord, and he wanted to be with Him.

You older confirmands, someone has been watching you, too...we have. But not to laugh; to learn, to imitate. You were taught by your Lutheran pastor that when you come to church, "it is the Lord." It's not a stranger preaching to you and absolving you of your sins; it is Jesus speaking through His messenger. When you come up to the altar and see bread and wine, you were taught that "it is the Lord." Jesus gives you His body and blood in the Sacrament. And so as your pastor spoke like John did, announcing that in these holy things "it is the Lord;" you, since then, have acted like Peter diving into the waters Sunday after Sunday, year after year, decade after decade in order to be with Jesus.

Peter would have been tired swimming all that way, and so there have been times, perhaps many, when you came to the House of the Lord to be with Jesus even though you were tired and exhausted.

But you came anyway because "it is the Lord." Peter did not jump in, however, without first covering his nakedness. He put on his outer garments. And so you older confirmands have shown us over the years to dress with dignity in God's House, and especially when coming up to the Holy Supper. But more than that, you have shown us that we must cover ourselves with Christ. We come to His House as poor sinners, all of us. We need His forgiveness, His righteousness, His faith, His promises, and so we lay aside our refusals to forgive others; we walk away from our lives of sin; we come up to be with the Lord with a repentant heart. As Jesus told His disciples not to forgive unrepentant sinners, so we come to be with the Lord, and to receive the Lord, asking God to cover our sins with mercy, to cover our shame with the robe of our baptism, to cover our mouths with prayers and praises, to cover us entirely in Christ.

As Peter drew himself up out of the water his muscles surely ached, his joints would have been in pain, he would have been trying to catch his breath. And so some of you we have been watching as you come up because "it is the Lord" in His House and Supper, and there is a cane in your hand, or an oxygen tank, or you simply come slower than before - not as you did when you were younger, but still you come because "it is the Lord."

Now that day on Galilee other boats may also have been out fishing, but when John said, "It is the Lord," no one but the disciples went to be with Jesus. But that did not keep them away. What other men did, or did not do, was not about to keep these men from the Lord. And so today you, the Class of 1950 have, with many of our other older confirmands, seen people come and go, come in to the church and walk away from it. You have seen classes kneel before the altar with some sticking, and many leaving. But what others have done has not changed you, and your continued faithfulness is an inspiration to us.

Today the call goes out here in church, in our communities, in our world, "It is the Lord!" But most pay no attention. When our church bells ring proclaiming, "It is the Lord," many are too busy, or they're going fishing or hunting, or they just do not care. Peter did care, and the other disciples cared. Their fishing could wait. Life can wait. "It is the Lord!" And when they came to the Lord, He had a meal ready for them--a hot breakfast cooking on a charcoal fire.

Jesus never disappoints. He is always present to give His blessings to those who heed the call, "It is the Lord." And His blessings are here for you today whether you were confirmed sixty years ago, or even longer, or whether being in God's House is a recent part of your life. His blessings are given into your ears this morning, and into your mouths at His altar. He gives you what you need the most--the forgiveness of sins, His Holy Spirit, faith, the promise of God's abiding presence, the hope of heaven forever.

If you are one, like others in this world, who has been neglecting the call, "It is the Lord," God has forgiveness here for you today. Your Lord takes your sins to His cross. He died for you. He rises for you. And He calls you to follow Him because He is your Lord. If you are one who has been faithfully heeding the call, "It is the Lord," then you know that you, also, are in need of pardon. You know, as every true saint does, that you are a poor sinner. But you know that because here, "it is the Lord," you, too, are forgiven. There is mercy here always for you.

Today as we thank God for His blessings upon all of us, and especially upon the Confirmation Class of 1950, we sing their Confirmation Hymn, "In the Hour of Trial." And no matter what the hour--in trial or in joy, in days of sickness or health, whether we are approaching our last days or whether God has much time remaining for us on earth, "it is the Lord" who pleads for you, who died for you, who

rose again and lives for you. May He keep you, the Class of 1950, with all of us, faithful even unto death always heeding the call, "It is the Lord!" Amen.