

Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."²⁴ He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

²⁵ "All this I have spoken while still with you."²⁶ But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

²⁸ "You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I."²⁹ I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. (John 14:23-29)

What does your Promise Mean?

What is a promise? What's the difference between a child who says, "I'll be good, mommy, I promise!" and a groom who promises his bride that he will be faithful to her for as long as they both shall live? How are those two things the same? A promise is binding yourself. Whether it's the promise you make on your wedding day or a child's promise to be good, you obligate yourself to do something or to not do something. Of course, the promise of a father who has consistently loved and cared for his children means much more than the promise of a co-worker who rarely follows through. Some people make promises so easily that they have almost no meaning at all. But even then, the meaning of the promise comes from whether the person who makes it takes seriously the fact that they have obligated themselves.

God makes promises to us. He obligates himself to keep them. And we make promises to God. Today is all about the promises we Christians make when we stand up and declare our faith in Jesus. After we confess our faith in Christ and in the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, we make a series of promises: to continue steadfast in that teaching; to endure all things, even death, rather than fall away from it; to conform all our lives to the teachings of God's Word; to be faithful in hearing the Word and coming to Communion; and to remain true to God as long as we live. Those are huge promises. All of us who are communicant members of the Lutheran Church have made those promises. This morning, we'll hear this year's confirmation class make those same promises. But before we do, each of us should consider: **What does your promise mean?**

I.

Our Lord tells us this morning that **your promise means that you love Jesus**. Understand what we're saying here. In most religions, people promise to be good in order to get to heaven. The thinking is that we do the best we can and God sees that we did more good than bad and so we go to heaven. That's not what we're talking about this morning. No human being can actually keep a promise like that. In order for us to be good enough for the real God of the Bible to let us enter heaven, we would have to be perfect. Who among us can claim such a thing? We make a very different promise, a promise based on the fact that God has already made the greatest promise of all to us. God has promised that all our sin is paid for in Christ. God has promised that we will go to heaven because of Jesus. We make a lifelong commitment to live for and to love the God who sent his Son to die and rise for us and to live for and to love that Savior who came.

Jesus said, **"If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."** This past Thursday, Pastor Gibbons from Lola Park was the chapel speaker for school. He asked the kids, "What is the one word summary of the law?" There was a dead silence. I started to get worried because this week was examination and that is a question that the confirmands get asked. I was starting to worry that we were going to have to cancel confirmation and make everybody go back and redo this whole year of catechism class. But then, at the last possible moment, a hand went up and that student gave the right answer: love. Love is the one word summary of all that God commands us.

But that means that love isn't a feeling. It's actions and attitude. Love means that I have no other gods. Love means that I never misuse God's name or his teaching. Love means that I come faithfully to hear his word. Love means that I obey my parents and God's other representatives. Love means that I do not hurt or harm my neighbor in his body. Love means that I honor marriage and keep myself pure from sexual sins and

even from lust in my heart. Love means that I do not steal things God has given to other people. Love means that I do not say anything that harms my neighbor. Love means that I have no sinful desires for blessings God has given to others. That's the Ten Commandments, right?

If we love Jesus, we will keep his commandments, so when we're confirmed, we promise to conform our lives to those commandments. But Jesus said more than just the commandments. He said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my *teaching*." Love means that we let the Word of God take captive our every thought. No matter how hard it is for our 21st century brains to accept, love follows God. That means we let him guide us on questions like creation and evolution, gay marriage and abortion, the roles of men and women in church and fellowship practices. Martin Luther once wrote to a co-worker that if we are faithful to everything God says except for the one thing the devil is attacking, we haven't been faithful at all. Do you see his point? We've spent the last two years in catechism class reviewing all the major doctrines of Scripture and establishing what God teaches. But you know what? Some of those doctrines are harder to accept than others. No matter how many of the easy ones we can keep, no matter how often we've been to church and how much money and time we've dedicated, no matter how many people would call us examples of Christian living, the real test comes when the devil or the society we live in or our own sinful weakness makes it hard to follow Christ. If we're faithful 99% of the time and we only give in on those things that are hard to do today, we have not been faithful at all. If anyone loves Jesus, he will obey his teaching.

So what about it, my friends? Have we who made these promises thirty or forty years ago, or five or six years ago, or last year – have we kept them? Have we followed Jesus' teaching and conformed our lives to all that he says in his word? Have we obeyed the commandments in heart and mind as well as word and action? Have we stood for pure doctrine no matter how unpopular it is? Or have we made compromises because that's what you have to do to get along in this life? And you young people who are about to make these promises, do you intend to keep them? To conform all your life to what God has said? To suffer all, even death, rather than fall away?

Those are scary questions. Honestly, not one of us has kept these promises perfectly. And looking forward, our track record doesn't promise dramatic improvement. We are still sinners. The sinful nature inside us rages against these promises. At the moment that we make them, the sinner inside us is already undermining them. Every day that we live here, he fights against us. All too often, weakness and sin wins.

But take heart, my friends, because the sinner inside isn't the only one there! Jesus made us new in the gospel. Of all the human beings who have ever lived, Jesus alone was perfect in his dedication to God. Never once did he sin, not in his words or his actions, not even in his heart or his mind. He didn't live that perfect life to make us feel bad because we can't do what Jesus did. He lived that perfect life to replace our sinful life. God gives us credit for Jesus' perfection. And God gives us credit for Jesus' death. He died to pay for all the times and all the ways that we didn't live up to God's Word. He died for all the excuses. He died for all the times that we were only faithful to the easy stuff. He died and he paid because we have that sinner inside us and he died and he paid for all the times that sinner won and for all the times that sinner is going to win in the years ahead. After he died, he rose. That resurrection promises us that all our sin is paid for and gone. God sees only Jesus when he looks at us. God declares that we are holy and righteous and we will live forever.

When God says that, it changes us. His gospel has recreated us and now a new man lives in our hearts. That new man never flinches from the hard stuff. He rejoices to do what Christ says even when there's a price to pay in this life. That new man does live in you right now. So your promise today comes from the new man and it commits you to strengthening that new man and to using all the power God gives you to fight against sin. The miracle of God's grace is that you do win. Not perfectly, not on this side of heaven. We fight a lifelong battle against the sinner in our hearts. But we have Christ on our side. We have God living in our hearts. We have the power of the gospel in word and sacrament to renew us every day. And so we do love Jesus. We do obey his teaching. That is God's promise to you. That is what your promise today means.

II.

Our promise comes from our trust in Christ who loves us. The confession these young people will make today is the core of their promise. Our faith makes our promise what it is. So **what does your promise mean? It means you have peace in Christ.**

That peace is why we commit ourselves to following him. Jesus promised his disciples that he would send the Holy Spirit to remind them of all he had taught them and to teach them all things. That promise was

for the men who would write the New Testament and found the Christian Church. Jesus was promising them the gospel. And through them, he has given that gospel to you and to me. Immediately after he promised us the eternal truth of the gospel, he said, **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”**

We have peace from Christ. First of all, that means an end to warfare. Sin makes us God’s enemy. But Jesus changed that. We aren’t his enemies anymore, even though we continue to wrestle with that old man inside us. Our battle with God ended when Jesus rose and when the Holy Spirit gave us faith. In that peace, God gives us peace in our hearts. Yes, the battle rages on inside us between sin and righteousness, between faith and unbelief. There are days when we just want to give up. But in Christ we have peace. He calms our hearts with his promise that we will win in the end. We will reach heaven and then we will be free from that sinner inside us. We will rise. The truth is, the sinner is not our true self anymore. I know it seems that way sometimes, and sometimes, we pastors give that impression. But the true self that lives in you is the new self, the believer. Only the believer will survive.

When I was the age of our confirmands, I thought that the best thing about heaven would be the end of pain. Nothing would hurt anymore. I’d never feel left out or cheated. I wouldn’t glasses anymore. We would all be friends together around the throne of Christ. Those things are all true and they will be tremendous blessings. But after more than 35 years as a communicant, I’ve come to realize that there’s an even greater blessing coming in heaven: being free from sin. Not just from temptation and from a world that’s broken by sin, but being free in my heart from the desire to sin. Being free from that old man. That is coming. And it will be a joy.

That promise is the source of peace. Don’t let your heart be troubled and don’t be afraid. The sinner inside you won’t win. The devil won’t win. The unbelieving society we live in, that works overtime to make it hard for us to live our faith, that wants you to compromise and give up the hard things God says, won’t win. God will win. You will win. You will live with Jesus forever. Between now and then, he is with you. He lives in your heart. He strengthens the new man with the gospel. He promises to bring you to heaven, where he has gone. He will keep that promise.

Today is all about promises -- our promises to be sure, and the promises these young people will make. But first and foremost, every confirmation is about God’s promises, about the way that he binds himself to forgive us, to love us, to care for us and to bring us home to heaven. In his promises, we find the strength to make and to keep ours. Remember the promise you made, if you’ve already made it. Look forward to the promise you will make, if you’re preparing for it right now. Listen to the promise these young people will make and rejoice in the power of God to enable them to make and to keep that promise. Amen.