



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Palm Sunday

March 25, 2018

“Promises, Promises”

(Eccl. 5:4)

Rev. David K. Groth

“When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin” (Eccl. 5:4).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of his great humility and patience and be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

I don't know about you, but I love studying the faces of those old black and white photographs and imagining what kind of personalities are behind those faces, and what they're thinking, what kind of lives they lived. The cover of your bulletin is from the 1937 confirmation class at Trinity Lutheran Church in Milwaukee. There's only one person in this photograph that I've known. More on that later. The rest of what I'm about some of these individuals is pure imagination, but imagination based on experience.

One person that stands out right away is the pastor, front and center. Is it just me, or does he look a little strung out, a little bedraggled? He's been coaxing these 68 kids toward this day, and "sure as shootin'" not all of them have been happy or cooperative participants. The day has finally arrived and he has mixed feelings about the lot of them. Some of them are ready, and probably could have been confirmed years ago. Others, not so much, and for a few, not even close. But the pastor knows to hold them back now would cause more damage than good. And besides, one thing he doesn't need right now is drama.

There are palm branches in the background, which means it's Palm Sunday, which means Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and a whole bunch of Easter services are bearing down on him. He's wondering how he's going to get through the week. And he's also wondering about those kids behind him, how some of them will soon drift away from the church. He's told them again and again that confirmation is not graduation. But those kids are still dependent on their parents; and some of their parents are going to be less than helpful. The pastor knows that's

ultimately on them, not on him. So he knows he's not going to see many of these kids much anymore, and he pretty much knows which ones too. They might come for a visit when it's time to sprinkle someone with water, rice or dirt, but otherwise, they're as good as gone.

The pastor knows what Jesus said about the branch that is cut off from the vine. It shrivels and dies. He knows people like to say you don't have to go to church to be a Christian, but he also knows in the Bible we are part of a flock, and Jesus is the Shepherd, and you can't be part of the flock in isolation. Moreover the lamb that is separated from the flock is always the one the Bible calls lost. A lost lamb in the wilderness hardly stands a chance. You hear of feral pigs in the woods of Wisconsin, and feral cats. You never hear of feral sheep, and there's a reason for that. They die. I think this old pastor is worrying about that; feels defeated by it and a little helpless in the face of it. Can you see it in his eyes?

Let's look at some other faces. One that stands out to me is a boy in the top row, second from the right. You see him up there? He's got big ears and he's smiling. It's just a guess, but I think he's smiling because he knows he just got away with murder. He's smiling because he knows he couldn't recite the Ten Commandments if his life depended on it, and he's not sure what the Lord's Supper is about either. Yet, by gum, they confirmed him. He's smiling because he knows the pastor coaxed him through the public examination, lobbing him only soft balls right in the strike zone. The first pitch he took a swing at it and whiffed altogether, but the next one he made contact and it drifted past the infield. He's smiling because he's finally done with all this religious stuff. Maybe this boy falls away for a time. But I like to think there's something that brings him back to the faith . . . maybe it's the death of his dad, or maybe it's the good woman he'll marry. But he comes back, this time for himself (not because he has to). This time he uses those big ears to take in the Good News of salvation in Jesus and

hearing it again for the first time it puts a smile on his face and on his soul for the duration of his days.

Lot's of interesting faces in this picture. There's the girl seated immediately above the pastor. She smiling too. She's smiling because she's the top student in the class, and everyone knows it. She's one of those hyper-achievers, scorned for it by the kid with big ears. She comes from a good family, a strong family, and though the pastor threw some fast, curving balls at her during the public examination she answered them well . . . smacked a couple of them out of the park! This one the pastor isn't worried about. But maybe he should worry, because all we are like sheep. Each goes his own way. It's one of the things sheep do best. Top students from good families can get lost too.

Then there's the girl above her with dark hair. She's pretty; an introvert. But she meets a nice young man at Walther League and they start dating and eventually get married. She would have liked to have become a scientist, but that wasn't so easy for a young woman then. So when the kids came along she stayed home and took care of them and that work is important too. She remembered Luther said something about the one who lovingly changes an infant's messy diapers is doing work that is every bit as important as a pastor preaching.

Have a look at the first row of boys . . . that one with the glasses on the far-left side. I'm going to guess he's the pastor's son. His dad encouraged him to go to the seminary, and the boy thought about it some, but he just wasn't interested. He ended up being a carpet salesman, and that's good too. God needs Christians in business and politics and medicine and law. He needs Christian policemen and plumbers. And God uses all these vocations to serve others. It's all important work, whatever you do. Do it well and do it to the glory of God and do it in service of others.

Three boys to his right there's a tall, serious young man. Doesn't he look like a future banker? Can't you see him sitting behind a wooden desk considering a loan request? I imagine he does very well for himself, becomes

very successful, but soon learns happiness doesn't necessarily come with wealth. He learns what really makes him happy is not declining someone's loan request. It's serving others. So he becomes a scout leader and joins the Rotary, and flips pancakes, and washes dishes, and helps the elderly navigate the steps at church. He discovers you don't become happy by pursuing happiness. Joy comes when you forget about yourself and serve others.

It's 1937, which means these kids have been living in the Great Depression since they were six. Yet look at how they are dressed, and with those big, beautiful corsages. I wonder what sacrifices families had to make. It must have been important to them.

It's 1937, which means all those boys up there will be about 18 years old when America enters the Second World War. The majority will enlist or be drafted, and at least one or two won't come back. Looking at the faces, I wonder which ones. In any case, some of those boys had to grow up in a hurry, and warfare forced them to start thinking again about this religious stuff. Will they survive the war? If they don't, what's going to happen to them when they die. They thought they were through with it, at least until they were near death. But now death has come near them, and it's all so relevant again.

God has ways of making it relevant for us all. We are never as done with God as we'd like to think we are, and the Good News is God is never done with us. He sticks with us even when we are incredibly distracted. He stays close, with his mercy and love. He stays close during times of temptation, times of fear and sadness. He stays close when the evening comes, and when our work is done and when the fever of life is over. And that's when he draws incredibly close to his faithful and gives safe lodging and a holy rest and an unearthly peace.

One more face, and this one I actually know. She's in the third row up, fourth from the left. (2X) Her name is Mildred Braun. Mildred was a member of Good Shepherd at one time and her daughter Sharon James remains a member.

We buried Mildred about ten years ago. She was a very kind woman. God would bless her with a marriage lasting 53 years until the death of her husband. God would also bless her with children and grandchildren, and great grandchildren too. He would bless her also with a steadfast faith; she would not drift away. For six decades her church in Milwaukee would be a second home, and the faith that was nurtured there would sustain her as she lived out her years at Marquardt Memorial Manor here in town. Near the end, Mildred suffered from Alzheimer's. It would rob her of her memories and much of her personality. She would forget her friends and even some family members, but she would not forget her Lord. More importantly, the Lord would never forget her. On the day of this picture Mildred promised she would suffer all, even death, before falling away from the faith.

Most of you made a similar promise when you were confirmed. When you were confirmed, you said you intend to live according to the Word of God and in faith, word, and deed, remain true to God. You said you will not fall away from it. You said you will suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from the faith. Our text says that God "has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it."

Last month, another jihadist group in Nigeria kidnapped another 110 schoolgirls, and took them into the jungle. Thursday's Wall Street Journal reported the group released almost all of the 110 schoolgirls they had kidnapped. But one girl they did not release. Her name is Leah Sherubu. Leah is a Christian, and she's still being held because she refused to convert to Islam (WSJ, 3/22/18). Heaven alone knows what price she is paying for her faithfulness. What would you have done in her position?

You and I will likely never have to make such a decision. But we do make many smaller decisions to be faithful . . . or not; they come at us every day, and our whole lives through, and these small decisions, they start mounting up. Will we let our light shine, or will we hide it under a

bushel? Will we be true to God, or just sort of put up a good front? How will we choose to spend our time, our money? What will we choose to watch on the screens? All these little decisions mount up and shape who we are. Pray God gives you the strength to remain faithful, in small ways and in big ways, and your whole lives through.

And give thanks to God! After all, we aren't the only ones who make promises. The Lord makes them too. Here's one from Isaiah: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (1:18). Another from Jeremiah, "I will remember your sin no more" (31:34). For all we who are like sheep, here's a promise God makes in Ezekiel: "I myself will search for my sheep . . . I will rescue them, gather them, pasture them, and tend to them" (34:11ff).

Are you weary? Burdened? Go to him. He promised, "I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). Wondering whether you'll make the cut? Jesus promised, "I give them eternal life" (Jn. 10:27). Ready to go home, as in home home? "I am coming soon" he says (Rev. 22:20) and "will take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (Jn. 14:3).

It's the promises of God that are most important. And because God promised, one day a man rode into the capital city on a donkey, and less than a week later they had him up on a cross. The religious authorities had promised one another they wouldn't rest until that man was dead. But it wasn't their oaths that killed him. It was his own promise to be sin-bearer for us, to pay the price for us, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood.

Tomorrow (today) 14 young men and women will make big promises to the Lord, and we pray that God will help them keep those promises and help us to keep our promises. Even more so, however, we thank God for the promises he made to us. Amen.

