

The following is a sermon preached at Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church on May 5, 2013 which was Confirmation Sunday. The guest preacher was Pastor Steve Hoffard, who taught these youth in their first year of confirmation. Zion is also Pastor Steve's home congregation.

6th Sunday of Easter
Rev. Steve Hoffard - May 5, 2013
Zion, Stratford – Confirmation Sunday

Acts 16: 9-15
Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5
John 14: 23-29

What Can I Tell You?

If you would indulge me I would like to start this morning with a variation of an old joke. It goes like this:

Pastor Doug attended the last mayor's prayer breakfast and was sitting with three other clergy members. They were discussing how they keep mice and bats out of their old church buildings. The Anglican priest admitted that she has resorted to poison and trapping as the only effective way to rid the church of the pests. The Baptist pastor was appalled and exclaimed, "They are God's creatures, and the bible says, 'thou shalt not kill', how can you possibly do such a thing in a church no less!" Pastor Doug piped up and said, "Let me tell you what I do. What I do takes a bit of time but is foolproof and does not require killing any of God's creatures. First, I baptize them, and then after a few years go by I confirm them. It works really well, as they never set foot in the church again."

The thing that makes jokes like this one funny is that they contain at least an element of truth in them. It brings to life that old adage, "If we don't laugh at the situation we would have no choice but to cry."

There was a time when church folks did not see our Confirmands like you eleven, disappearing after confirmation as a problem. They understood that you had to get out of the nest and stretch your wings for a while, and they knew you would be back; at least when you had kids of your own. They knew it because that was their experience. However, that was your grandparent's generation.

Today the statistics are much more sobering. Not only will fewer than 20 percent of you that do disappear from church ever return, but those of you that do return, will do so much later than your parents did. Plainly, our world is very different and people are just waiting longer to get married and start families of their own. If all this isn't painful enough for those of us who seem to love most things church, you can add to all this doom and gloom, the fact that many parents once their kids are confirmed will again disappear from church themselves.

Therefore, I must tell you, I feel like I am up against some insurmountable task. I feel like I have been given the job of sharing with you eleven, and the rest of you for that matter, the magic words that will have all of you hunker down safely into a pew, into a lifetime of active church membership.

So maybe we should clear that up, right here at the beginning. If you are waiting for those magic words from me, sorry but it just aint gonna happen. If I had found those magic words since

leaving here less than a year ago, I would have been excessively busy tending to my own mega church back in Kingston to come back and share those words with you today.

So what can I share with you today? Can I tell you that you should stay active members of a church because that is how you will obtain eternal life? No, I cannot! Not only would it not be true, but also it would be inconsistent with what you learned in confirmation classes. If you missed it in class, I am going to tell you one more time, the very root of the Lutheran religion is that there is nothing you can do to earn God's grace. That God's grace is a "free" gift, with no obligations. Going to church will not help you earn it. It is already yours.

I would like to be able to tell you that you need the church to become a better person. And yet while I believe the church at its best can teach us to how to better love one another, the actuality is some of the most compassionate ethical people I know are atheists, and some of the most evil people in the world have been churchgoers. So I cannot tell you that either.

Maybe I could tell you that you need to come here to encounter God. Yes, some people have experienced the unmistakable presence of God the strongest, in moments and places of worship. However, many more could tell you they have experienced God out in the world not only in nature but in city streets as well, and in people, and situations. So in good conscience I cannot tell you that either.

I would like to be able to at least tell you that the church will always be here for you and your children whenever you decide to come back. However, I cannot with any certainty tell you that either. Although this congregation is still healthy, it is one of the few. The facts are that most of our churches are fading quickly. As older members go to their heavenly home, new young members just are not taking their place. There is not money to maintain buildings and pay pastors, and so while I believe that Christ's church will never die, the writing appears to be on the wall for the institutional church of our parents and grandparents.

So even though I can't tell you any of those things with either certainty or in good conscience, what I can share with you, as one who left the church not too long after my confirmation day, the surprising things I found when I did return.

I found a church that was far from perfect, just like me. I found a church that was full of hypocrites, but a church that had room for one more. I found a church that did not have easy black and white answers for me, but I found a church that contained people at least willing to explore the questions. I found a church where I was not expected to believe everything in the bible actually happened, a place where I was encouraged to read the bible seriously and not always literally. I found a church where people tried to be faithful in the best way they knew how, but where most were, humble enough to admit that they might be wrong. I found I could disagree with people. I discovered they actually cared more about belonging than insisting we all believe the same things.

I guess what I am trying to tell you is that even though I was raised in the church, and thought I knew what it was all about, I was surprised to find out it was quite different than I had constructed it to be in my mind. Once I found myself back in the church, I discovered it did not hinder my spirituality and longing for meaning, but instead strengthened my faith and intensified my yearning for justice. Nurtured in the church among a family of faith, I found hope for our world. And as you know all of those exciting discoveries of church led to significant change in my life.

You Confirmands are at a time in your life that comes with significant change, this is only one of those times, there will be others, but at this point in life you are transitioning from children to adults, you will be moving on to high school, you are exploring who you are in the world.

In the reading this morning from John's version of the story of Jesus, Jesus is about to leave his disciples, which will create immense change in their lives. For the last two years, in every moment they have travelled with, ate with, slept with, prayed with, and most importantly learned with Jesus. Life will be significantly different from here on in.

Jesus knows the disciples are going to be stressed out about this drastic change in their lives. Jesus offers them comfort with the promise that he will always be with them. That he will be their peace. Christ will give them peace, but not like the world gives.

When we strive for peace, we look for material security, we desire the absence of conflict, and we yearn for rest and relaxation. We work hard to obtain those things and many times never succeed in fully achieving them. The peace that Christ gives comes from the presence of God in our lives, that kind of peace that can come amid turmoil. Often it is that presence and peace of God that gets us through those times. Hey! It even got me through some of your confirmation classes.

You are now done with Sunday school, and confirmation, and you are now faced with choices about what you will do to nurture your own spirituality. How will you seek out and discover hope and meaning in our world? Where will you seek peace in those times it feels like your life is falling apart? Some of you will turn to church for that, and some of you will not. During our year of classed together, I got to know each of you a little bit, and I can say with certainty that losing any of you will be the church's loss.

While that loss saddens me, I do not fear for you, and I do not fear for the church. For Christ's promise was true for the disciples, and it is true for all of us still today. The advocate, the Holy Spirit who God sends in Jesus' name goes with you wherever you go. Through that Spirit Jesus will continue to teach you everything and remind you of all that he has said.

That is good news for the eleven of you, it is good news for the rest of us, and it is good news for Christ's church now and whatever God makes it to be in the future. It was the Spirit that drew me to this church, whether she does the same for you, or not, I can only pray that you remain open to that Spirit of God in all that you do, now and always.

Amen.