



So, with our Confirmation tomorrow, I couldn't help but think of my first time leading a group of middle schoolers through Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* and some highlights of Scripture, which I understand isn't always the most...edge of your seat material for the big kid adults, let alone younger adolescents. Nevertheless, we trudged through, and I did my best to make things a little more interesting. I would search through YouTube videos and tried to include some games and other hands-on activities here and there, always attempting to make connections with the lesson to hopefully ensure that it would stick with them beyond those couple of hours we had together. After all, I always heard about the Confirmation problem we Lutherans had been dealing with for a while: that far too often after the young person finishes that part of their faith journey by affirming their baptism in front of the congregation on a Sunday morning, far too often they would never be seen again. I was convinced that maybe if I did enough cool YouTube videos or games or other activities, I would somehow miraculously break the trend: perhaps a miracle to rival that of the Resurrection itself.

So, with that in mind, I tried something even a little more different. There's this tradition in the church (almost as old as Luther's *Small Catechism*) that instead of buying ashes from some local church supply store ahead of Ash Wednesday, you actually should take the palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday, and burn them to the point of actual ashes. Add in a bit of oil, and then you're all set to start the season of Lent.

Well, I figured it could be a memorable experience to include the confirmands in that process that not many of the adults who sit in the pews realize goes on in some churches. And let's just say it turned out to be a memorable experience for...a different reason. Thankfully, one of those middle-schoolers was moving up in the Boy Scout ranks with all his merit badges. It probably wasn't proper protocol to have him be the one to start the fire to burn the palms, but we did anyway. All was going just fine in a little area outside between the church building and the garage, but then the young hot-shot pastor forgot a rather important detail. All of a sudden, the wind hit just right and through the door, that for some nonsense reason I left wide open, went all the smoke imaginable into the kitchen: the very kitchen that was quite possibly the second most important room in the entire church behind only the sanctuary. For it was in that kitchen that coffee hour meals and youth group fundraiser dinners and other community event functions were prepared for, and yet, within an instant, the smoky sight and not-so-clean aroma was overtaken because of my lack of any common sense whatsoever, all while I was trying to focus on winning over some young adolescents, as if the fate of the entire church depended on it.

Of course, those middle schoolers just laughed about it as I was frantically running around. But after the near literal dust settled, we did our usual trying to connect back to the main story of the night. Granted, we obviously had to change course just a bit. We jokingly acknowledged that, evidently, not everything goes according to plan, and that carried over to faith as well. Some in the church plan to put children through baptism and Sunday school and first Communion and Confirmation in hopes that they'll grow up to not only continue worshiping in that same place, but that they'll love church life so much that they'll serve on committees and volunteer to help mow the lawn and serve on the council. Safe to say, not everyone's faith journey goes according to their or anyone else's plan.

But then we were also further reminded that this whole faith thing can get rather messy at times, and not just with smoldering palm ashes, but when you really dig into what is said in the Scripture pages and even what a Martin Luther writes from half a millennia ago. However, in the midst of all of that is the Gospel that hopefully no Confirmation student or any child of God ever stops hearing: that no matter how messy life gets, no matter how many detours taken in the life and faith journey, no matter what happens, this God is never going to stop being right beside you; not even sin and death could stop it.

Those confirmands from years ago didn't have to pass a test to get to that final Sunday to affirm their baptism. And Gianna, Molly, Anderson, Alex, and Lexa didn't have to either. Confirmation is not supposed to be about memorizing Bible verses and getting to know Martin Luther writings by heart. This is about helping young people amidst a time of the most immense expectations for them and their future, that there is absolutely nothing they can do to stop God from cherishing their every moment of life. The world will do its best to convince them that they must perform to a certain level in a variety of ways to move up in the school and job and social rankings, not necessarily all a bad thing, but none of it will ever be more important than the Gospel for them and all of us. No matter how much life does not go according to plan, no matter how messy it gets at times, nothing is ever going to happen to separate them or you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!