

A pastor once found a squirrel in his church. He tried everything to get rid of it, but it just kept coming back. One day he thought why try to fight it? Minister to those who show up at your door, even if they are squirrels. The pastor let the squirrel sit in the pews during the church service. He fed it little nuts during coffee hour after worship, and he even enrolled the squirrel in confirmation classes. The squirrel faithfully attended confirmation classes, and one day he was confirmed in the church. The squirrel never darkened the door of the church again.

This joke would be more funny if it didn't hit so close to home. 1. (oops!) Why does it seem that confirmations are graduations? You can look at the booklet in our Student Center of old confirmations. We have fairly complete records given our decades of church history. How many people do you recognize? How many people are still here? Some pastors even moved confirmations into the fall from spring so as to avoid the association with graduations from eighth grade or high school. I don't hang out at my old high school or college anymore, and sometimes people treat confirmations the same way.

It would seem that the deck is stacked against us. In a 2017 study of the LCMS, they looked back to the young adults who were confirmed between 2004 and 2006. In that thirteen year window, a third of the confirmands remained active in our church body, a third changed denominations or only had a minimal involvement in our church body, and a third were M.I.A.—the leaders at their church had no idea where they went.

2. (ugh!) It would seem there is a lot of coming and going around Pentecost, too. Today is also Pentecost. Our Gospel text is from a section of John's Gospel called Jesus' farewell discourse. These chapters contain some of Jesus' last words to His disciples before He is betrayed, crucified, and buried. He tells His disciples, **“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.”** We might also balk at a statement such as this. Could Jesus really be serious when He said such a thing? Wouldn't it be nicer if He had stayed? Did He too “graduate” to bigger, better things when He ascended to heaven, and He would like to associate with us about as much as a college sophomore wants to hang out with a high school freshman back in his hometown?

Likewise, we see at Pentecost that the people were gathered in one place at Jerusalem. People from all over the inhabited world. We read, **“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”** What an amazing miracle, but do you think that perhaps from those three thousand from all over the known world, some of them went back home? What became of them? There was certainly no online LCMS church locator!

But we see there's more going on here than meets the eye. Jesus' Ascension is not a graduation and an abandonment of the Church, it is setting the stage for the Helper to come. Jesus said, **“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.”** 3. (aha!) Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to kick start His Church.

How many converts did Jesus win during His earthly ministry? The Bible never tells us exactly how many. If we take a guess from Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth where Paul talks about Jesus appearing to believers after the resurrection, Paul says that Jesus appeared to five hundred Christian brothers and sisters. In the three years of His earthly ministry, Jesus maybe won six hundred converts? Think of the wonder of the miracle of the Holy Spirit bringing three thousand souls to baptism in one day of preaching!

When we talk about the comings and goings of Pentecost, it's not simply Jesus leaving. Jesus ascends for a purpose, and He delivers us someone powerful. He delivers His Holy Spirit, the Helper who proceeds from the Father and is on a mission to witness to the deeds of Christ.

As we confirm Madeline today, it's not simply checking off another box so she can say “Church? Been there, done that!” We are inviting her into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ her savior. We are sending her to be a witness wherever the Lord may take her. **ON THIS CONFIRMATION SUNDAY, WE CELEBRATE THE HELPER WHO GOES OUT SO WE CAN GO OUT, TOO.**

4. (whee!) The Holy Spirit guides into all truth. On this confirmation Sunday, we celebrate with all the Church the young people who make vows before their congregations to stay true to the faith and to confess boldly the faith delivered to them in their baptisms.

One question we will ask Madeline is this: “Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?” Madeline's answer is not “yes,” but “Yes, with the help of God.” The Helper, the Holy Spirit, will take these promises Madeline makes and she will grow into them as the Holy Spirit continues to confirm her faith.

In our text from John, we see the work of the Holy Spirit is to shine the light on Jesus: to glorify Him, to speak to you the words of Jesus. The Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth. The Holy Spirit has been working through class time, through reading Scriptures together, through quizzes and tests, and memory work, to lead Madeline into all truth.

Guiding into all truth is what this congregation and those like it are all about. A parishioner told a pastor on a confirmation Sunday, “Pastor, this morning was a really unpleasant morning because I had to explain to my family member who is at

church today that they couldn't commune along with my newly confirmed child because they're not part of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod." On this day when we welcome many guests to celebrate Madeline's confirmation, we're glad you're here. What's more, we ask you to consider following in the same journey as Madeline who walked alongside Jesus as she learned what the Bible teaches, so you too can make a similar confession as her to be part of this congregation or a sister congregation near you. That is what Pentecost and Confirmation is all about.

Because 5. (yeah!) The Holy Spirit sends us, also. Jesus ascends to Heaven, and He leaves us the Holy Spirit to be a witness to Him, and then the Holy Spirit sends you. Jesus continues, "**And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.**"

We always hear the first half of the joke about the squirrel leaving the church after confirmation, we never hear the rest of the story. Five years after the squirrel was confirmed, the pastor finds the squirrel in a supermarket with three little squirrel babies in the shopping cart. The pastor catches up with the squirrel, and he kept the faith—he just joined a squirrel church in the next town over where he met his wife, and had three wonderful kids.

Of course, we don't baptize or confirm squirrels. There is no squirrel church. Yes, a third may remain, a third may leave, a third may be missing in action. But just like at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is powerful to make us witnesses in the places we go. Yes, some of the confirmands in our booklet may be missing in action, but many of them have simply moved on to other congregations in other cities to be blessings to those saints in that place. We are on the receiving end of this as we are blessed by the presence of many college students who come from all over the region to share with us the joys and blessings of salvation.

Who knows, perhaps some of those Christians baptized on Pentecost went to their hometowns, and they started churches of their own or they were part of the core of believers who helped Peter or Paul start a church when they came to visit. We will never do ministry more effectively than the Holy Spirit working through His Word and Sacrament.

We pray for those "squirrels" who simply ran off. We continue to invite and to be that witness to those in our lives whose faith has shrunk or been extinguished. Confirmation is hardly a graduation, it's the starting signal for those just starting their walk of faith. On your marks, get set, go!