

MADE CHILDREN OF GOD

Reformation Sunday, 1963, was my confirmation Sunday at Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church in Canoga Park, California. I affirmed the faith of my baptism. I have a red *Service Book and Hymnal* given to me on that day as a gift from my congregation. Just in case you're wondering, I do not remember the sermon that day. But I do remember that it was a significant milestone in my life of faith, in my walk with Jesus. Before that Sunday, we, together as a class, were 'examined' by the pastor and members of the congregation. We were asked the questions of Luther's *Small Catechism*, e.g., What is the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed and what does it mean? We also memorized the books of the Bible in order and a number of Bible passages. I recited Psalm 103. There is something to be said for memory work.

Before our confirmation Sunday, I remember having an appointment to meet with the pastor, sitting down in his office, and being asked about my life. It was there, in his office, that Pastor Rommereim first said to me, "Glenn, I think God may be calling you into the ministry." Whoa! I was a math and science kid, you know, ready to defeat the 'godless communists' through physics or chemistry. Could Pastor Rommereim be right? Might God be calling me?

When I became a pastor, I made it my practice to visit each confirmation student's family and then before confirmation Sunday to have each confirmation student make an appointment with me, to sit in my office, and I would visit with each one about their life, family, studies, music, sports, etc. The year came, 1994, that I sat with our first born child, our son Hans, and we talked together about this milestone in his life. He recited to me the Apostles' Creed and we talked about his goals for the future. Then he added something, "Dad, you know I can't be perfect." "I know that, Hans. And I'm not a perfect dad."

We come to this house, and with this household of faith, we together acknowledge, we confess our sin. "There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." My name is Glenn, and I am a sinner. We are reminded, because we need to be reminded, again and again, that we live by grace, by the grace of God we live. By God's grace, in and through Holy Baptism, we have been made children of God. That is who we are. We are God's children now. As sons and daughters, we have a place in the household of God, forever. Yes, we are sinners, but our sin does not own us. We belong to God.

God's Son has made me free from Satan's tyranny,
from fear of death and bonds of sin, from all that plagues my soul within.

We are God's children now. We live in relationship with God, a covenant relationship—of promise, hope and love. We live by grace. This grace is not cheap, but dear and costly. So, we must not, we dare not take this covenant relationship for granted or treat it lightly, for God's covenant with each one of us cuts deep into our lives, into our hearts, so that we truly know the LORD. We know that we belong; we know it so deeply that we scarcely need reminding. That's how deeply God's *torah*, God's way of life for us is written, inscribed, and cut into our hearts. God wants for us to live as responsible sons and daughters of God.

Yes? That's what we want for our own children, right? To live as responsible members of the family.

Hans, those 17 years ago, was worried about being perfect. It hurt my heart. How do we raise our children so that they know, deep down, they are loved? That we already love them, and that our love, though imperfect, is given freely, no merit necessary? How do we do that, and at the same time raise them so that they live as responsible members of the family, children who gladly, willingly do deeds of love, do the chores and all of that, because they know, deep down, that they belong to the household? That's what God wants for us—to live as God's beloved children, knowing we belong to the household of God, and in the knowing, in the believing and trusting of God's love and grace, we live as responsible children of God, faithful to God and to God's way for us in this world. That's what Jesus asks of us: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

God wants us to know this and to live this, for the only way to know the truth is to live it. To know the truth of Christ, the one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life—to know the truth is to live true to Christ.

On this Reformation Sunday, as four young people affirm the faith of their baptism, allow me to address them even as I, 17 years ago, addressed 12 confirmands in Colfax, Washington, including our son Hans.

You were born into a family, and as important as your family is, and as much pride as your family takes in its family heritage and traditions, there is something far more important to which you belong, someone far more important. Your parents, we mothers and fathers, carried you to the font, to the waters of Baptism, aware that this would mean for you a kind of death—a dying to this world, a dying to yourself. Even so, we carried you to the waters, where, in Holy Baptism, you were made a Christian. You, like us, are still being made a Christian. Today, as you affirm your baptism, you take another step in the life-long process of conversion, in which your baptism is not only the beginning, but also the final goal.

What shall we say? We want you to know that you are loved. Whatever the trials may be, trials that test your life, trials that test our relationship with you and yours with God, we want you to know you are always loved. We are not perfect parents. We are not perfect Christians. We all need God's grace and mercy, and we need mutual forgiveness. We want life to be good for you, of course. We want you to do well in school, in your friendships. We want you to make healthy and wise choices. We want you to know the joys of someone loving you and being your companion in life. We want your struggles and hardships to be few and not overwhelming. But we want more.

We want you to know the joys of worship and fellowship in the household of God. We want you to know the tie that binds our hearts together in Christian love. We want you to know the unity of Christ which overcomes conflicts within the body of Christ. We want you to know the mutual sharing of woes and the mutual bearing of burdens. We want you to know the transcendent, life-changing, death-conquering power of forgiveness. We want you to know and love and serve the Living God, for you a child of God, and God's children make a difference for good in the world. We want you to know to the core of your being that you belong to God, and to know and love God is Life itself. This is God's plan for you—to thank, praise, serve and obey him, in all your doings, goings, thinking and feeling, day in and day out. This is your highest worth—to give honor and glory to God. No success will lead you astray and no failure to despair when your worth comes from God loving you and you loving and worshiping the Living God.

I close this sermon with the closing words of that confirmation sermon 17 years ago:

Son, whatever may come your way, whether success or defeat, whether your name is at the top of the list or at the bottom, whether you gain riches and fame or suffer in want and poverty, we pray that you live **for Jesus' sake**. We pray this prayer:

Loving Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is blessed, according to the riches of your glory, confirm, sustain, and empower us all in steadfast faith. Grant that our young sisters and brothers fulfill the vows they make this day as they affirm the faith of their Baptism in your Holy Name. Strengthen them in their inner being with the might of your Holy Spirit, that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith, and that they, being rooted and grounded in your love, may have the will and power to comprehend what is the breadth and length, the height and depth of the love of Christ, to know your love which surpasses our knowing, so that they may be filled with the very fullness of God.

To God Alone Be Glory.

Amen.