

Ascension “Earth Meets Heaven” With Confirmation

Bishop Frank Schuster

It is such a joy to be here with you to celebrate the sacrament of confirmation. God has brought you to this day. I hope that my words will only reinforce what has already been shared with you.

[Es una gran alegría estar aquí con ustedes para celebrar el sacramento de la Confirmación. Dios les ha guiado hasta este día. Espero que mis palabras solo refuercen lo que ya se ha compartido con ustedes.]

One of my family’s favorite pass times when I was a kid, and something I enjoy even today, is camping. When you are outside, enjoying nature, it just doesn’t feel like heaven is that far away. Do you know what I’m talking about? I mention this because the Gospel reading begins with the Apostles meeting the Risen Jesus on a mountain. The mention of the mountain is important because mountains are that place where heaven and earth touch.

We are blessed that way here in the Pacific Northwest with the beauty of God’s creation. However, even here, there is a temptation in our society to think of heaven and earth as radically separate, as if the two can’t coexist. We have here and then we have there, and the two can never meet. This is most apparent with many people’s “understanding” of death, as if our soul and body are mutually exclusive of each other and that funeral liturgies reverencing the body are unnecessary. I think this stems from the idea heaven and earth are galaxies apart from each other. They are not.

The Resurrection of the Lord and the Ascension of the Lord are feast days that affirm the goodness of the human body. In the Resurrection, Jesus rose from the dead with his risen body. The tomb was empty, you see. In the Ascension of the Lord, Jesus is elevated from the earth with his human body. This means our fleshy human nature is now welcome into the realm of heaven and will be someday for us in some mysterious way we can’t comprehend. I think about that when performing a graveside service. When we bury a loved one, for people of faith, what we are actually doing is gardening. We are planting seeds that will bear fruit into everlasting life. Meanwhile, many people have shared stories over the years about how they can still sometimes feel like their loved one is nearby. My friends, heaven and earth are not that far apart. What separates the body from our heavenly vocation is sin.

You see, this is why one of Jesus’ opening statements in the Gospel was the need to repent for the Kingdom of God is near. Even in the Lord’s Prayer we see this message when he invites us to pray, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Do you see it? Jesus’ mission isn’t to keep heaven and earth separate. He invites us to welcome heaven on earth.

We see it in our first reading from Acts of the Apostles. Who are these men dressed in white? They are messengers from heaven here on the earth, heaven and earth have connected you see. What is their message? Their message is, “Why are you standing there looking at the sky?”

As if, heaven is somehow meant to be a separate place from the earth. This message is much clearer in our Gospel reading. Prior to ascending, Jesus says, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

My friends, the central insight of Christianity is that God has visited his people in the person of Jesus Christ. Heaven and earth have collided in the incarnation. Jesus has welcomed our human nature into the very life of God. Our baptism into Christ makes us citizens of heaven, right now, this moment, not something to wait for after the moment of our earthly death. By our configuration to Christ in the sacrament of baptism, heaven and earth collide, and become one in our person, in our lives, our relationships and our experience.

My friends, with that in mind, today we celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation. It is a sacrament that will complete your sacraments of initiation into a community that transcends the building we are in and even space and time. This community includes all here present, but also the angels and saints, and all of our loved ones who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith. We want to be with them someday. How we get there is with Jesus. We need his Holy Spirit. The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit that will be given to you will be a permanent reminder of which flock you belong to and a reminder of where the Good Shepherd is leading you.

[Amigos míos, en unos momentos recibirán el sacramento de la confirmación. El verbo latino para la palabra “confirmar” es muy revelador. La palabra literalmente significa "fortalecer". Este sacramento te fortalecerá en tu discipulado, invitándote a una relación más profunda con Jesús. Este sacramento te ayudará a encontrar las respuestas que buscas en la vida, y que el mundo simplemente no puede darte. Este sacramento te ayudará a convertirte en un discípulo misionero, compartiendo el amor de Dios al mundo con el ejemplo de tu vida. El sacramento de la confirmación te fortalecerá en la jornada espiritual que tienes por delante, porque a veces la vida puede ser muy dura. El Espíritu Santo te ayudará y si lo dejas entrar en tu corazón.]

Yes, my friends, once we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, our lives then begin to produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit. When that happens...we can't sit still. We want to share this gift of joy with others, especially to the poor and marginalized. In the Sacrament of Confirmation, you are also being sent like the apostles to share the Good News of the Gospel to the world so hungry for God's love. And you will be Good News. You will be Good News. Why? Because every person here tonight believe that you are Good News. Believe it. My friends, remember that heaven is never that far away if we stay close to Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life. May the good work that has begun in you be brought to completion through Christ our Lord. Amen.