



PILGRIM PAPERS

Mt. Zion Lutheran Church

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June 2025

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Affirming the Faith

Twice a month, five middle school students have been joining Lee Kipps and me in confirmation classes here at Mt. Zion. Three of the students are from Mt. Zion and two are from St. Martins Lutheran Church down the road. For most of the adults in our congregation, you might wonder just what have the young people been learning about this year?

Before I was installed as pastor of Mt. Zion, the kids had already spent a year focusing on Luther's Small Catechism. So, this year we have focused on general questions of the faith. Using the "Collaborate" curriculum from Augsburg Fortress titled "Lutheran Living", we tackled challenging topics like "Who is my neighbor?" "Why is the cross so important?" "What is grace?" "How am I both a saint and a sinner?" "Why do we go to worship?" "Does the devil exist?" "What do we do with doubts?". These are just some of the chapters we covered together!

Each time we gathered, the kids asked good questions and did a lot of deep reflecting. Of course, it is hard to say how much information their teenage brains will retain. If the goal of the confirmation program is to turn out youth who can memorize and recite back rote answers about the Christian faith, then I would not be feeling very hopeful at the moment. However the true goal of confirmation is to 1) Encourage life-long faith education 2) Expose them to the fundamentals of the Christian faith as lived out by the Lutheran tradition 3) Prepare them to stand up in church and make promises to live out their Christian faith as an adult. Personally, I feel that the young people are standing on this threshold, ready to open the door to a more mature faith in Christ our Lord.

If you look in our red ELW hymnal on page 236, the confirmation rite asks the youth to say "yes" to their baptism, confess their faith in God using the creed, and then promise to live out the following: 1) To live among God's faithful people 2) to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper 3) to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed 4) to serve all people, following the example of Jesus 5) and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

Our five teenagers are almost ready to be confirmed! We are hoping that by Reformation Sunday 2025 (October 26th) they will be prepared to stand up in worship and affirm their baptism. I hope all of you will continue to support these young people. Take the time to visit with them and become interested in their lives. Invite them to join you in volunteering here at church or out in the community. Remember them in your daily prayers. Together we give thanks to the Holy Spirit who calls and enlightens all the baptized, including our youth!

Reflecting on Pope Francis

In 2013, during the secret conclave of cardinals that gather to elect the next pope, it had become clear to the leaders gathered that Jorge Bergoglio from Argentina would be elected. Before the final vote was cast to make it official, his colleague, Cardinal Claudio Hummes of Brazil, whispered in his ear, "Don't forget the poor." This comment was true spiritual inspiration to Jorge, who immediately thought of Saint Francis of Assisi, an important reformer of the church in the 13th century who dedicated his life to serving the poor by becoming poor himself. So, when it was time for Jorge to be introduced to the world as the next pope, he chose for himself the name of "Francis", the first time a pope had been named for the saint. In an early papal address to the world, Pope Francis stated that he prayed that the church would become poor for the sake of the poor.

This news was immediately popular with many Protestant clergy, including myself. We were excited because it indicated to us what kind of pope Jorge Bergoglio intended to be. And a pope who promised to dedicate himself to a ministry modeled after Francis, the saint who served the poor, preached humility and peace, and took simple joy in God's creation, was a promising Christian leader in the making, indeed!

Looking back on Pope Francis' twelve years in office, I believe he has lived up to his namesake. He set a very important tone right away in 2013 when he decided to live in a simple guesthouse within the Vatican. He chose simple garments to wear in his daily ministry. He consistently preached to the Roman Catholic Church and the world about the dangers of wealth inequality, poverty, and consumerism. He appointed new cardinals from countries outside of Europe, often from poor nations, to better balance church leadership. And he launched an investigation of the Vatican Bank which had been criticized for secrecy and alleged corruption.

But what has made Francis so popular around the world with ordinary people? Watching Francis' funeral and the outpouring of love and grief from billions around the world, it is a question worth asking. While the total number of Roman Catholics world-wide is around 1.4 billion, Francis has made fans who are not Roman Catholic. While much of his daily work involved diplomacy, church administration, theological study, etc... he became truly popular throughout the world for his very approachable and grace-filled conversation when visiting with ordinary people. While he scolded world leaders for not doing more for migrants and refugees, he visited with migrants himself and even invited a group to take refuge at the Vatican. Every Maundy Thursday he visited with homeless members of the local community and washed their feet. When he visited the United States and gave an address to Congress, he did not sit down to a meal with the important and influential, but instead ate his dinner with members of a local homeless shelter. Francis often annoyed people in power, but he will be remembered fondly by the poor everywhere, _.

A new pope has been elected, Leo XIV, and he has promised to continue where Francis left off. Once again, I am excited to see what kind of leadership the most famous and influential Christian leader in the world will provide. I believe we have reason enough to celebrate this election, trusting that Leo, like Francis, will prioritize the Kingdom of God as Christ himself preached it:

"[Jesus said] 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor!'"
-Luke 4:18-19.

Lutheran World Relief- Quilts and more

In May, our Mt. Zion Quilting group carefully laid out the fruits of their labors so that we could bless the bounty before sending it all along to the Lutheran World Relief ingathering. The women managed to complete 44 quilts, 36 lap robes, 4 school kits, and 2 health kits. It was with real joy that all of us were able to stretch out our hands, touch a quilt, and say a prayer together, blessing these items so that God might use them to bless others. But just in case you aren't sure why our quilting group makes these items every year, here are a few fast facts about Lutheran World Relief and Lutheran quilting ministries:

Q: What is Lutheran World Relief?

A: LWR is a non-profit organization that formed immediately after WWII. It was a joint effort made by Lutherans from different Lutheran denominations out of concern for refugees and the general population in Europe who were trying to pick up the pieces after the war. However, LWR continued its work even after their WWII relief efforts ended and have expanded to other parts of the globe and into different forms of relief work. Today, it continues to be a partnership ministry of different Lutherans in North America (ELCA, Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod, and other Lutherans).

Q: Is LWR the same thing as ELCA World Hunger?

A: No. Remember that LWR is an independent non-profit that is the shared work of several Lutheran denominations. Our own denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America also runs our own hunger and relief programs, in partnership with other Lutheran churches in other countries. So, when we send our money to ELCA World Hunger, we are supporting ELCA-specific ministries. But both LWR and ELCA World Hunger do vitally important work!

Q: Why quilts?

A: The majority of LWR's work today involves money. The non-profit raises funds to invest in important projects around the globe in areas of education, health, agriculture, advocacy, and more. LWR also receives foundation money from USAID, USDA, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Starbucks, and more to invest in development projects on every continent. Lutherans know how to run social welfare programs! But as vitally important as it is to continue to support this work with our dollars, people long to do something more personal and concrete to help our neighbors in need. As LWR says on their website: "LWR Mission Quilts create a tangible, lasting bond between the people who lovingly assemble them, and our neighbors around the world, who receive quilts in their greatest times of need. We give thanks to the countless men, women, and youth who assemble LWR Mission Quilts every year."

Q: What happens to the quilts?

A: The quilts are sent domestically and globally to all kinds of people in need. But the usual recipient of an LWR quilt might be a refugee living in a refugee camp or someone living in makeshift home after a war or natural disaster. Again, from the LWR website: "Quilts can be used as warm bedding, simple tents or floor coverings. Each one reflects God's loving presence in a world rife with suffering."

Q: How can I help?

A: First, go to the LWR website! There might be an area of their work that would interest you. I was lucky enough to go to Nicaragua in 2008 with a group of LWR volunteers to learn about their work investing in small farmer-owned coffee farms. But if you want to start small, you can visit with our own Mt. Zion quilting group. Even if you don't know how to sew, they might have a task for you to help them with. In addition, LWR also accepts health kits and school kits. You might like to go shopping and assemble a few kits for next year.

VBS: Wilderness and Jesus Our True North

Mark your calendars! Vacation Bible School will be here before you know it! July 21st – July 24th, all children ages preschool through 7th grade are welcome to participate. Please be sure to spread the word to any relatives and neighbors you know who might like to attend. In addition, Pastor Kristen will host a class for adults. If you would like to help volunteer in some capacity, please contact Debbie Kipps.

What will we be learning this summer? The kids will be diving into the Gospel of Matthew each day, in addition to other Scripture passages, exploring how Jesus guides our steps throughout life. The curriculum is framed with a very fun "Wild Alaska" feel. In addition to Bible stories and songs, the kids will also have a chance to make crafts, play games, and enjoy building community with one another.

Jumping off of the theme that the kids will be exploring, Pastor Kristen will be teaching a class on wilderness throughout the whole Bible. We will have at least one Bible story each evening (Old Testament and New Testament) that is set in the wilderness. Together we will wrestle with what it means that so many God-encounters happen in wild places, and what that might mean for us.

And Don't Forget....

- Shepherd's Hand will have a table out at the Yard Crawl Saturday August 9th, 2025 with donated hand-crafted items for sale.
- Homecoming Sunday August 17th, 2025
- Shepherd's Hand will set up a table of hand-crafted items for sale again on September 27th, 2025 for the New Market Fall Festival