

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last Monday we took some of our 8th grade confirmands to the synod office to meet Bishop Schneider. While we were there we toured the synod office and talked with Bishop Schneider about what he does. The Bishop talked to the youth about being the pastor's pastor and the pastor to all of the congregations in the synod. He also talked about being part of the conference of bishops and many other things. The youth and adults that attended had an opportunity to ask the Bishop questions. Most of the questions were about what the Bishop would miss most when he retired. We also asked the bishop about what his confirmation days were like, both as a confirmand, and as a pastor. He shared some stories with us. Erika Demme, our Director of Christian Education then asked the Bishop what advice he had for the confirmands for life after confirmation. The Bishop's response was that one had to decide whose side they were on. He furthered explained that the youth would be making a promise that they renounce the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises on their confirmation day. He further explained to the youth that they have to decide every day whose side their on at school, by the way that they talk with their friends and treat other people. Also at school when they face peer pressure to try drugs or alcohol. One has to choose whose side their on at home by choosing to listen or not to listen to their parents. One has to decide whose side their on. Are we on Jesus' side or evil's side?

In today's gospel text Judeans gather around Jesus and ask him to tell them whether or not he is the Messiah. They didn't like being in suspense. The Judeans just wanted to hear Jesus say I'm the Messiah. Jesus told the Judeans that he had already told them that he was the Messiah because of the works that he had done in his Father's name and they hadn't believed. Jesus

goes on to tell them that they are not part of his sheep because his sheep hear his voice and they follow him.

I have to admit that when I first read the gospel text for this week I wrestled with how I was going to preach on the Judeans not belonging to Jesus' sheep. It's hard for me think about people not belonging to God. As I thought, studied, and prayed about this portion of the text and the question that Erika asked the Bishop on Monday things seemed to be a little clearer. In John's gospel, belief and unbelief are surrounded with the notion of who one is affiliated with.

Robert Kysar, author of the Augsburg Commentary on John reminds us that:

“They (the Judeans) do not believe because they are not part of Jesus' flock. This is another of John's hints that belief and unbelief are determined by one's affiliation. It is obvious that for John belief and unbelief are ultimately rooted in God's acts and people's alliances.”

Whose side are we on? In this day and age we are pulled in so many directions. Each day we have decisions to make. These decisions, ultimately, make us choose whose side we are on – Jesus' side or evil's side. As the bishop said to our youth about when they have to decide whose side their on – we too have to decide whose side we are on in our relationships with regard to how we treat our spouses, our friends, our family, and coworkers.

We have to decide whose side we are on when it comes to social and justice issues. Do we help someone in need or do we ignore them? Do we speak out for people who suffer or do we pretend not to know what is happening to them?

In acts of stewardship we choose whose side we are on. Do we care for God's creation or do we litter? Do we give generously of our time, talents, and resources or do we keep them to ourselves? The list could go on and on with the decisions that we need to make throughout our daily lives.

Jesus also told the Judeans that his sheep hear his voice and they follow him and that they will have eternal life. No one will take his sheep away from him. As we make the decision of whose side we are on, Jesus holds us, his sheep in his hand. Even in times when we stray off the path, as sheep sometimes do, our shepherd is with us. Nothing can snatch us out of God's hand. When we choose whose side we are on, there are times that it may not be easy, but know that God is with you. Listen for God's voice.

Are we on God's side?

Now the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding be in your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen.