Sunday, April 17, 2005
A LETTER TO ERIN, ET AL
John 10:7-10

This weekend, 31 young people are being received into full membership of this congregation through the Rite of Confirmation. One of our granddaughters, Erin Irene Dolan, is a member of this class. She is the youngest of three granddaughters who live in Lincoln. Her two older sisters were confirmed here. Another grandson who lives in Omaha was also confirmed by me in this congregation, as were all three of our children. Our three children were married here, and I was privileged to officiate at their weddings. In addition, it has been my honor to baptize our three children and all nine of our grandchildren.

Erin is the last of our grandchildren who will go through the confirmation program in this congregation, although we have another granddaughter who lives in Omaha and four grandsons who live in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, who have not yet been confirmed. So, it is possible that I could be involved in those ceremonies. I have chosen to deliver this sermon in the form of a letter to Erin. However, it is, through her, a letter to all members of this year's confirmation class and to all of our children and grandchildren, and yours as well.

I also hope that those who are listening, especially parents or grandparents, will try to imagine what you would say in a letter to your children or grandchildren about the meaning of confirmation. What suggestions would you have for these young people as they continue their journey through life with the Christian faith as their travel guide and road map? You might want to write them a letter regarding their confirmation.

Dear Erin, et al.,

There are a number of significant events which are memorable as far as parents and grandparents are concerned in the life of a child and young person as he or she is growing up. We remember when you smiled at us for the first time, when you were brought to the church for baptism, when you said your first word, when you began to crawl, when you took your first step, and began to walk on your own.

We remember when you went out with friends for the first time, and we nervously called home frequently through the evening. We remember when we took you to that first day of preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. We remember the first day of middle school and then high school, when you got your driver's permit and your driver's license, and especially when we let you use the family car for the first time on your own.

The Rite of Confirmation is another one of those significant events in your life because today, in the presence of God and the people present here, you will be confirming the promises made by your parents when you were baptized. The ceremony may be brief, but do not let its brevity mislead you.

A few years ago, right after a wedding ceremony at which I had officiated, the bride said to me, "Is it over already?" I looked at her, smiled, and said, "No, it has just begun."

The same is true for the confirmation service today. It is another beginning and at the same time a continuation of what your parents promised when you were baptized. When you graduate from high school or college, that's the beginning of another new phase in your life,

and at the same time a continuation. Graduation does not mean that learning has ended, just as confirmation does not mean that faith formation has ended.

Therefore, in this letter, I am going to suggest three guides for your continued spiritual learning and growth in the Christian way.

The first guide is: do not be afraid to doubt. Do not be afraid to ask questions, to continue to discover new information. Maturing is a process that needs to go on throughout your life. Every major advance in human history has come about because someone had the courage to doubt. Gaining knowledge and understanding in every aspect of life consists in asking the right questions. All of life is a life-long process.

The second guide for your continued spiritual growth and maturity is: do not be afraid to believe. That may sound as if it is the opposite of the first guide — do not be afraid to doubt — but it's not. Belief is not the opposite of doubt. It frequently grows out of or is the result of honest doubt. Belief frequently comes before understanding. You can believe in something even though you do not completely understand it. I believe in the force of gravity but do not totally understand it. I believe in the power of prayer but do not fully understand it. I believe in love but do not completely understand it. I believe in the Holy and the Sacred, or whatever other term I might use to speak of God, but do not completely understand it. That does not mean that I should not try to learn more about God and try to understand as much as possible.

I believe that I can learn more about God and the world at large. I believe that tomorrow can be better than today. These beliefs are an important part of our heritage, which comes out of the Hebrew tradition. Pastor John Robinson said to our Pilgrim forefathers and mothers before they boarded the ship named the Mayflower to come to this country, "There is always more light and truth to break forth from God's word."

In other words, life is not meant to be an endless cycle of going around in circles. Progress is possible. You can improve conditions in this creation, or you can make them worse. Because you are created in God's image, you are a co-creator with God.

This second guide to continued spiritual growth and maturity has as its corollary: do not be afraid to make a commitment. It has been said of many people in today's culture, especially in this country, that they are afraid of commitment.

Today in the confirmation vows, you are making a solemn and sacred commitment. That's a very important beginning point. Following through and living out that commitment will be key.

You might be surprised to know that there are many parents who bring their children here for baptism and solemnly promise to do their best to bring their children up in the Christian faith, but for some, that commitment is not honored.

You might also be surprised to know that there are church members who, for some reason or another, do not make a financial commitment for the support of the church. Others make a commitment but do not honor it. Why? I don't know. They make a commitment to make car payments and home mortgage payments but will not do the same with the church. To have a healthy society, a good church, and a strong faith, commitment is necessary.

What you will discover is that there is an incredible benefit that comes to you personally from the discipline of fulfilling your commitments. It will give you a deep personal joy and satisfaction.

Do not be afraid to doubt. Do not be afraid to believe. These are the first two guides for continued spiritual growth.

The third guide is this: do not be afraid to act. You have to act on what you believe. You need to live your faith in your everyday life; otherwise, your faith will atrophy. Use it or lose it. There's a wise old saying: it's easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting. It's what I call the "power of positive acting."

That's what the followers of Jesus did after Easter. They began to act on their faith. They began to tell the story, to live their faith in their everyday life. And as I said in last weekend's sermon, when they began to live their faith, they discovered that they were walking with God.

What does it mean to live your faith? There are many ways to do this. One of my favorites is to remember that the way you treat people is the way you treat God. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "As you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me." The implications of this principle are astounding. If you mistreat another person, you are mistreating God. If you hate another person, you are hating God. On the positive side, when you love another person, that's the way you love God. The word "love" means much more than liking another person or having someone as your best friend. It means treating other people with dignity and respect. It means you would never use or abuse another person.

Do not be afraid to doubt. Do not be afraid to believe. Do not be afraid to act. Here's one more: do not be afraid of difficulty. There's an old saying among sailors, "No sailor ever distinguished himself on a smooth sea." What is known as human greatness is never achieved apart from difficulty. It's a part of everyone's life. The decision you and everyone else has to make is how you will handle difficulty.

As you meet life's difficulties, remember above all the words of Jesus from this morning's scripture reading: "I have come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly." Life is good. Be happy now. Let it go. Amen.