

“Living on the Edge”
Fourth Sunday of Easter—Confirmation Day
I Peter 1:13-23
April 13, 2008

As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God’s life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, “I am holy; you be holy.”
I Peter 1:15, The Message

You may have noticed that the title of my sermon for today is “Living on the Edge.” I thought that would be a very appropriate title for words directed at our 2008 Confirmation Class, although if the rest of you would like to listen, there may be something in here for you as well. Living on the edge is a popular concept, you know. There are many examples, some more obvious than others. When you deliberately head your raft or kayak into a Class V rapid on a big river that is more than capable of throwing you out and sucking you under—that is living on the edge. When you take the mound with the bases loaded, no outs, and the heart of the order coming to the plate—that is living on the edge. When your wife asks you if a particular pair of slacks makes a certain part of her anatomy look too big, and you actually attempt to answer that question—that, my friend, is living on the edge. Bungee jumping, hang gliding, mountain biking, storm chasing—one way to live on the edge is to live a life of taking risks, to long for that big rush of adrenalin, or to try those things in which you conquer environmental obstacles and challenges.

But that is not the kind of “living on the edge” that I want to talk about with the Confirmands or with the rest of you this morning. There are other ways to exist on that proverbial edge, and those who truly do, do so for more than momentary thrills and spills. When Jackie Robinson walked onto Ebbets field for the first time and endured the slurs and threats raining down on him from the stands, for instance, he was living on the edge. When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on that bus after a long and tiring day at work, she was living on the edge. When Dr. Martin Luther King led the civil rights marchers over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama just weeks after “Bloody Sunday” had occurred, he was living on the edge. There are so many ways to live on the

edge, so many ways to live life in a way that others would never even consider, and so many of them have absolutely nothing to do with events like the X-Games.

When I was young man on the staff of a large congregation, there was a 94-year-old retired preacher who had an office in makeshift closet just off the main hallway. His name was Forrest Dudley. He was very frail, had thin white hair, and his back was so bent that he had to walk with a cane. Shortly after I arrived at the church, I was standing in the hallway with the senior pastor when Forrest walked by. After he had gotten out of earshot, my boss turned to me and said, “Now there is someone who spent his life living on the edge.” When I asked what he meant by that, he spent the next hour or so telling me that Forrest had not always been so old and frail. There was a time when he was tough as nails—both physically and spiritually. As a matter of fact, he was so tough that whenever a community had trouble with the Klan, the bishop would send Forrest to set things straight. Forrest had more crosses burned in his yard than probably any other white man in Texas or Oklahoma. He and his family received innumerable threats on their lives. But having his “loins girded with truth,” and armed with both the shield of faith and sword of the spirit, he looked the forces of darkness right in the eye—and defeated them. During all that time, Forrest was definitely “living on the edge.”

Or take Ruth Wood. For the first 172 years of its existence, The Methodist Church refused to ordain women. Interpreting certain scriptures with the popular thinking of the day, it was thought that women were unfit for leadership in the church. But all that changed at the 1956 General Conference. In 1957, Ruth became the first woman to be ordained in the Mississippi Annual Conference, which made her one of the first to be ordained in the United States. When I met her in 1980, Ruth had already been a pastor for nearly a quarter of a century. And oh, the stories she could tell. As you might imagine, rural Mississippi in the late 50s and early 60s was not necessarily a center of avant-garde thinking (Nebraska wasn't either for that matter.). Over the course of the years, she too was threatened. Men and women refused to come to church or, if they did, refused to receive communion from her. She was called names that are not permitted to be repeated in polite society, let alone in the church. Yet Ruth knew that God had called her to a

certain way of life. She also understood that the future of other women who heard that same call depended upon her remaining faithful. And so she was, despite the hardship that it brought on herself and her family. Ruth was one who truly lived on the edge.

Today our eight Confirmands will not just become members of Elkhorn Hills UMC, but members of the Church of Jesus Christ as well. As countless numbers before them, they too will come forward and publicly declare their faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And when they do, I will invite them, just as I will invite the rest of you, to live life on the edge. So what does that mean? I believe that today's scripture lesson from I Peter gives us a clue. Let's take a look.

Most people think that the first letter of Peter is actually a baptismal sermon; that these were words originally preached to those who were at the same stage in their faith journey as our own Confirmands. At that stage in church history, baptism and confirmation often happened at the same time, you see. Fred Craddock, who has thought a lot about I Peter, tells us that, "when candidates for baptism presented themselves, they were told that baptism is a rite of passage into a new life. After they were baptized, when they had moved from their old life to the new, they were given milk and honey, symbols of the promised land, of their new home in Christ, [and] of their new direction in life."¹ I suppose that the lemonade and cake we'll serve our Confirmands after this morning's service will be the Elkhorn Hills version of those symbols of their new home and new direction. But just like those early baptismal candidates, and just like those Israelites who also were heading for that land of milk and honey, its important for our Confirmands to remember that they have not yet made it to their destination. Like those before them, they are still on the journey. So this first letter of Peter begins by offering greetings to the "exiles" scattered about Asia Minor. Now history records no removal of Christians from Israel, Rome, or any place else to that particular part of the world, so more than likely, these "exiles" were simply those living away from their eternal home. In other words, this letter was written to those who were on a faith journey through a less-than-hospitable land. This letter is concerned with how to exist in a world in which, because of the

¹ Fred Craddock, The Cherry Log Sermons, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2001, p. 111

candidate's faith in Christ, no longer fits. And the way that it describes doing so is definitely "living on the edge."

This letter calls its readers, you see, to "be holy." The first letter of Peter borrowed a lot of its imagery from the Old Testament. And in the Hebrew Scripture's way of thinking, being "holy" literally meant, "to be set apart" or "to be different." Using that idea, I Peter called Christians to be different from the world around them. They were encouraged to leave their old way of life behind and embrace the new. They were called to be different from the surrounding culture in which they lived. Now that was hard back then, and it's hard right now. It's hard to be different when you want the approval of your friends. Everybody, no matter his or her age, wants to fit in. It's hard to be set apart when what you know what God wants you to do is the total opposite of what your friends and neighbors want you to do. No one wants to be seen as an oddball. It's hard to be holy when everyone else is acting very unholy. But then that is the call of everyone who claims Jesus as his or her Lord and Savior. And when and if you follow that call, then you are definitely living on the edge.

Can you do that, Confirmands? Can you be holy? Please understand what I Peter was saying. Don't confuse the call to be "holy" with the call to be "pious." I remember that there was a girl in my class in grade school who belonged to a denomination that did not allow its members to dance. Whenever the square-dancing unit came up in gym class, she would always be excused. Along with the other boys in my class, I always tried to tell the teacher that I had converted, but for some strange reason she didn't ever believe me. Looking back, I admire my classmate's piety, but that is not what I'm talking about. I also remember that when I was in college it was popular to wear your religion on your sleeve—literally. Jesus patches for your jeans, Jesus crosses for your neck, and Jesus bumper stickers for your car. I'm not ashamed to admit to doing that for a while. Looking back, at that particular stage of my faith journey, that was the way I chose to express my piety—simplistic as it might have been. But once again, that has nothing to do with what I'm talking about. Finally, I remember when I was part of a group that was invited to attend a meeting at a certain church. We arrived a little early, so my friend and I decided

to take a tour of the sanctuary. Preachers like to do that, you know. In front of the altar we saw a large box with a hinged lid that had holes along the side. I didn't figure out what it was until I saw Ray slowly backing away. It was their snake box. The people of that church expressed their piety by handling snakes. Please know that, once again, that is definitely not what I'm talking about. Please also know that I could have won Olympic gold that day. You've never seen anyone run so fast.

The dictionary defines piety as “dutifulness in religion” or “acts of devotion.” But that is not what holiness is all about. “Being holy” or “living on the edge” is not a call to be dutiful; it is a call to be faithful. It is not a summons to do pious things, but to live a holy life. It is an invitation to let your holy words manifest themselves in holy deeds, a challenge to let the work of your hands demonstrate the faith in your heart, a call to hear the word of God and do it in the midst of a world that begs you to do otherwise. Some of you my age may remember when Pope John Paul II traveled to the Rebibbia Prison, which is located on the outskirts of Rome. It was two days after Christmas of 1983. There, in a stark, empty room with bars on the windows the pontiff sat knee-to-knee with Mehmet Ali Agca, who 2½ years earlier had tried to assassinate him. Even today it is still an amazing image. Sitting in simple chairs, the two spoke for about 20 minutes. They leaned toward one another, listening intently. John Paul gently touched Agca's hand a time or two. It was a private conversation; only whispers between the two men. Yet everyone knew what was happening. The Pope forgave his would-be assassin. Of course, the world cried foul. It was a publicity stunt, some said. It was nothing more than politics, others cried. And there were those who were angry because they believe that Agca really didn't deserve to be forgiven. But for others, this amazing drama was a parable of what it means to be holy. John Paul just didn't preach forgiveness; he lived it—which as most of you know, is a very difficult thing to do. The world certainly doesn't care if we practice it. In fact, it advises against it. Yet God cares. It is part of the calling of those who are members of the church, that same church of which the Pope was a member. Pope John Paul II lived on the edge. And God calls you to live on the edge as well.

Greg, Logan, Madison, Emily T.J., Chad, Elyse, and Kadie, in just a few moments you will come forward and you will be asked questions that have been asked of people like you for centuries. If you answer in the affirmative, then Hughes, Janice, and I will joyfully receive you into the membership of Christ's holy church. But unlike American Express, membership in this body does not have its privileges. Rather, it has its responsibilities. You will be called to live your life much differently than you have been living it. You will be asked to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Can you do that? Parachuting, scuba diving, extreme skiing, and ice climbing are all exciting, but in terms of "living on the edge," none of them can hold a candle to what you are about to do.

May God strengthen you as you take your vows.