

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
February 23, 2020
Matthew 17:1-9
Confirmation/Transfiguration/Annual Meeting Sunday

“For the Confirmands”

Today is a big day for this church and for the nine young people we'll confirm, two of whom will also be baptized. It's the day they personally get to confirm the promises their parents made for them when they were baptized, and the day two of them will publicly confirm their faith for the first time. It's a big day for this congregation, too, because it's not often we get to share in this important passage. I want you to know, confirmation class, that everyone here is very proud of you. It has been a blessing for me, along with Rev. An, to be your teachers this past year and to watch you grow and mature and begin to articulate what it is you believe.

As I taught confirmation this past year, I couldn't help but reflect on my own confirmation class. It was taught by Dr. Harry Eberts, who was the senior minister of my home church. Dr. Eberts was a true Presbyterian scholar, and it is to him, I believe, that I owe many of my foundational beliefs about what it means to be Presbyterian.

My confirmation was the culmination of a yearlong class that was divided into four sections: the nature and structure of the Presbyterian Church, and God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. We, too, wrote statements of faith – which seem to be a Presbyterian rite of passage. And on confirmation Sunday, I read the statement of faith I wrote about Christ.

My confirmation class was large, probably 20 or so kids, most of whom never darkened the doors of the church after that Sunday. Maybe they came back after they had kids of their own, but more often than not these days, kids don't. Confirmands, I hope you won't be one of those kids. Because contrary to what you may think, confirmation is not a graduation ceremony from the church.

If you do think this, that today is some sort of graduation ceremony, it's certainly no fault of your own. The church-and by church I mean churches in general-have historically treated confirmation as a graduation ceremony. We give you a certificate, a token gift, and maybe even cake -- all of which resemble a graduation. Then, we ask you to write a public statement and tell us, at the young age of 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 even what you have concluded about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and perhaps the church universal. When we do that, I think we give off the impression that what you believe today is what you will believe for a lifetime OR that your education as a Christian is complete.

And that, could not be further from the truth. The Christian education you've received to this point, and the knowledge you'll share with us in just a few minutes, are only the beginning. Confirmation class, take note: Your beliefs-I hope-will grow and mature and change a great deal in your lifetime. The statement about Christ that I wrote and read for my confirmation (?), well I came across it a few years ago when cleaning my old office. It was a solid, well thought out statement of faith-for a 15 year old. Don't get me wrong, it was a good foundation-but that's all it was-a foundation.

So let me give you some advice. Think about your statements and what you believe today as a foundation-nothing more, and nothing less. Liken them, if you can, to building a house. You've done some excavating and poured the foundation; maybe even put up a rough wall or two with those statements of faith. But if you end there, you don't have enough-metaphorically speaking, you have plywood walls and piles of dirt, none of which will carry you through life.

You need more. You need walls and windows and furnishings. As you grow and mature, so will your knowledge about God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, as well as the church, the Bible and the world. You'll start forming your own beliefs and opinions about these subjects, separate and distinct from your parents' beliefs, so that on your foundation you begin to have rooms and eventually different stories and levels all your own. You'll probably build some things (or acquire some knowledge), that suit you for a time, but after a while it will grow a little old and you'll discard it, like an old

couch or wallpaper. You may build a balcony, and occasionally step out onto it, to get a good survey of what's around you. And sometimes you'll go through the hard work of tearing out a kitchen or bathroom, because life has dealt you a hard blow, and what you believed previously just no longer works. And there may even come a time in your life when you put a roof on your house, because you think your days of learning are over. But trust me, even a roof needs replacing eventually.

Someone reminded me recently, that when we talk about being disciples of Christ-which we do a lot in the church, we're really just saying that we're all learners. The Greek word for disciple is translated "a learner". Christian discipleship is a life-long learning process: we're all just trying to learn together what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Confirmands, you are joining a denomination that places a high degree of importance on learning. John Calvin, the forefather of Presbyterianism, was very skeptical of religious authorities, so much so that he fought for you to have in your pew a Bible to read and study and learn from instead of trusting me to tell you the gospel truth. Calvin and the reformers who followed him wanted us to question what we are taught so that we can continue to grow in our understanding of God. As I learned in my confirmation class, if you never ask a question, you never learn more than what you are taught.

Calvin was also so skeptical of religious authorities that he put forth the idea of the priesthood of all believers. It was a hallmark of the Protestant Reformation. In short, the idea behind the priesthood of all believers – which you learned about in confirmation -- is that all of us are called by God; all of us have a calling in life. It's not something special reserved for ministers only. All of us are called by God to do something special with our lives.

If you paid attention to the story from Matthew that we heard earlier, you may have noticed that in that story Jesus calls the disciples to follow him off the mountain and go into the world. And I think that's a really important lesson for you to hear today, especially since we talked in class about what it means to be a member of a church.

The story we heard is the story of Jesus' transfiguration, which we traditionally hear on the Sunday before Lent begins. In that story Jesus climbs the mountain with Peter, James and John and right before their eyes he transfigures—he becomes a dazzling white figure. Then, out of the clouds, comes God's booming voice, "Listen to him!" God says. And with that Peter, James and John throw themselves on the ground, cowering in fear. This was one mystery they couldn't explain.

They just didn't know what to make of it. You see, even the disciples who knew Jesus firsthand, didn't pretend to have all the answers.

If they didn't know it before Jesus transfigured, they knew then that Jesus wasn't like them; that he was something wholly other, something they couldn't quite explain.

But there was one thing they could do. They could follow him. Even if they didn't always understand him, which they often didn't, they could follow him.

And that's what they did. They followed him down off the mountain, into a crowd, and went right to work healing a paralyzed boy.

It is a wonderful metaphor for the church. Because as much as we may want to remain on the mountaintop, there is work to be done out on the plain. There are people who need to be healed. There are injustices that need to be brought to light.

But living life on the plain . . . indeed being a member of a church . . . is quickly becoming a counter-cultural thing to do. Far too many people think they can find God on the beach, out in nature, and even on a mountaintop so they need a church. And while I believe God can be found in nature, and can be experienced during a glorious mountaintop moment, when the chips are down – when life gets tough and that home you built comes crashing down and your faith is tested – which it will be – you need a community. You need a community of faith who will believe for you when you can't. You need fellow pilgrims on your journey; you need people to help you

rebuild when something goes wrong because no one can go it alone. Jesus couldn't go it alone; even he needed the support and help of other people. Even he knew that while mountaintops are glorious and God can be found there, not every day is a mountaintop moment for you, and not every day is a mountaintop moment for others. So a big part of our calling as Christians, as church members, is to go down the mountain and be in ministry with other people, and support them in their time of need.

I believe whole-heartedly that our call to follow Christ means we are called to love and to serve. We are called to love all of God's people-which doesn't mean we need to like all of God's people, but it does mean we'll treat everyone fairly; and, as a follow-up to that, we are called to serve all of God's people, especially the people with whom Jesus really identified: the sick, homeless, poor, and lonely; basically, everyone out on the plain. You see, Jesus undertook a life of service to and showed them that God loved them. In your baptisms, Autumn, Corbin, Dakota, Hayden, Andrew, Henry, Jeffry, (Jaime), Yoonji, and Ashley God called you – calls you -- to reach out to others in a spirit of love and justice and mercy. Today, you are confirming/affirming that you will keep that promise.

When you do that, please know that when we embrace God's call, God's we are never alone. The One who called us promises to travel with us and to never let us go.

And so, confirmation class, wherever you go, remember the grace of God and God's assurance that you belong to the God who created you, and that God is not simply a name, but a real being who lives within lives. And may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord be kind and gracious to you, and may the Lord look upon with favor and bring you peace today and every day.

Amen.