

Sermon for Confirmation Sunday

June 6, 2021

Today you are different. Can you feel it?

If Paul is to be believed, I am different too. I suppose, as with much of what we do here as Christian community, we'll have to take that on faith. Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth writes that despite what outward appearances might tell us, our inner nature is being made new day by day. Which means that we are not the same people we were yesterday. Because God in Christ is continually molding, shaping and transforming us in and for the world.

And this is a cause for hope, not despair. No matter what might be happening in the world around us. We do not lose heart...

Now, I know that it isn't as easy as all that. To simply tell ourselves not to lose heart when life comes down on us at times in all its crushing force. But Paul encourages us forward. Assuring us that this temporary burden will be replaced by a "weight of glory" that no scale can measure.

So, is there any way for us to get a peek at that inner renewal that Paul tells us is happening, even when we can't see it?

Today at St. John's is Confirmation Sunday. A day when we are blessed to bear witness to the next step in the faith journey of some of the young people in our congregation. They have committed time out of their own busy lives for two years. To spend an hour on Sunday mornings with their peers and adult leaders, questioning and pondering together what it means to say that we are in a relationship with this God, who is Parent, Child and Spirit. Each of us pastors have taken turns being with

them as they have wrestled with, debated over and prayed together about ultimate things and where God is in all of it.

Including in the reality that bad things happen in this world, even to us; that are not easily reconciled with the God we say loves us and wants only the best for all creation.

I usually tell young people going through Confirmation about my own faith journey. Teasing them that I somehow skipped the Confirmation process all together, yet here I am in the pulpit. I grew up in a not-very-religious family, which is not at all unusual these days. My parents had lost connection with the churches of their youth. Mom was Episcopalian and my dad was the Lutheran. When they had their own children, they did what many parents do, despite not being active worshippers -- they brought their baby to baptism. They happened to choose the Lutheran Church where my dad was also baptized. Not because of any particular affinity for Lutheran theology. It was simply the church closest to our house. There at the font at St. John's Lutheran Church in Lindenhurst they made promises on my behalf. Promises the young people being confirmed today will be asked to make now for themselves.

For me a key part of my story is the time I was away from the church. Between 4th grade Sunday School and my second year of college, I took a break from all that God stuff. Faith was not a huge part of my daily life. In fact, a relationship with Jesus did not factor into my consciousness much at all in that decade or so. In what is still mostly a mystery to me, I returned on my own to church at the age of 19. I say it's a mystery because I am not quite sure what led me to go back. There was no lightning bolt or conversion moment I can point to. But as I reflect on that time, I realize now that though I took a break from God; God never takes a break from us. God was continually working on me. Shaping who I was becoming. It is the best explanation I

have for what happened. That as soon as I returned to church, it felt immediately like something in my life had been missing and was found.

The reason I share this with young people being confirmed is because I want them to know that this ritual marking isn't the be all and end all of their faith journey. Because we know that it can feel like that. Those older folks in here who have gone through Confirmation themselves will probably relate to the feeling of pressure and expectation coming from well-meaning adults in your life. That after two years of class time and conversation about Jesus, you must go through with the public ritual. But thankfully God doesn't operate according to our rituals and designated milestones. God does enter into them with us. But we are not obligated to do them in order to receive the full promises of God that came to us in our baptism. So whether or not they are ready to say, "yes," to the questions put before them, the promises of God's grace are still real. And no matter what, their lives bear witness to all of us of the power of our relationship with one another and with Christ. A relationship that is transformative and renewing in ways that are impossible to outline for you in a sermon. Because the real message of our Christian faith is that it isn't about doctrines and faith statements or even our ability to recite a scripture verse. It's about life and how we live out in the world, knowing that somehow through Christ our connection to God is unbreakable.

Church became a family for me. I know that sounds cliché. But it's one cliché that holds up for us. In my own journey it was not one that took the place of my family at home. Though in my years as a pastor, I have seen the church literally become the only family someone has to walk with them in the most difficult times of their lives. Even through death. For me this great family of God was the one who knew how to look at my life and point to the places where God was at work. That is the greatest

gift we can give to one another as fellow journeyers with Jesus. To lift up the gifts of the other.

The most powerful moments I remember as the closest to “lightning bolt” experiences for me, were when another Christian elder looked at me and said, “I see the Spirit in you.”

This is why among the other promises our confirmands make today; the same promises we all have made and make with them, is the promise to “Live among God’s faithful people.”

And today, we God’s faithful people, surround these young ones, saying “We see the Spirit in you.”

Last week on Holy Trinity Sunday Pr. Jon reminded us that this life of faith is not a singular activity derived of our own ingenuity and ability. Instead, we are made in God’s image and meant for communion with each other. So that we have a new understanding of family that expands far beyond our own nuclear households.

This community of Christians scattered through the world are commissioned to live out our faith in ways that are visible to others. Signs of that inner renewal breaking through the outer layers of our existence. In this way our very lives are witnesses to others of the work God is doing in loving and blessing the world.

Faith Statement excerpt

“What I do know right now, is that being in a community that allows me to ask questions is an important part of finding yourself, and someday I hope to have figured everything out. In the meantime, even though I don’t know everything about my faith, I hope to grow and learn more about what my faith means to me, and that is why I am getting confirmed today.”

What happens today for these young people is that they are taking another step toward the co-mission God invites all of us into. Any of you who have ever taught them Sunday School. Or mentored them in sports. Or have raised children. Or have even just spent time with young ones over the years. You've all seen it. The amazing transformation of a human being day by day into the person they were created to be. When we witness it in young people standing up and living their faith in a multitude of ways, some even serving visibly in our worship as acolytes and lectors and participants, this is an outward expression of that inner renewal of the Holy Spirit.

They are different than they were yesterday. As are we. Renewed by the waters of our baptisms. And by our collective lives of faith, we are inspired by one another to say, "yes," to Jesus. And we do not lose heart because our God never takes a break from us. But heaps on us glory beyond measure, even when we it doesn't look or feel like we deserve it.

"...because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal."

Our lives of faith are a mystery -- one that we may never fully understand. But we promise to walk this road together, God's faithful people. Made new day by day to live out our co-mission in the world.