

“Confirmation – Not Just for Kids, Part 1: Who Is God?”

Sermon Preached by David D. Colby

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Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

For the first time in three years we have a confirmation class at Central. I am delighted to work with this group of eight kids in sixth through tenth grades. Last night we had a lock-in here at church. As the new pastor, let me tell you that this church is a great place to play Sardines! So, please forgive me if I look a little tired! Now, if you didn't know from listening to *A Prairie Home Companion* or from talking to your neighbors, Minnesota is a Lutheran state. And Lutherans are famous for their rigorous confirmation program – a two year schedule of classes, still featuring a lot of memorization of dates and creeds. I think there is a danger in making confirmation too much like school. Schools, after all, have graduations and disenfranchised alumni.

The story is often told of three ministers sitting around a table complaining about a problem they all had – bats in their church bell towers. We didn't see any last night, you will be happy to know. Back to the three ministers. The first said he tried to get rid of them one night by shooting at them. He said he had some success, he scared 'em off for a little while, but it left holes in the roof and now he had leaks as well as bats. The second said she had chased them all over the church, caught them in nets, put them in her truck, and drove all the way out to Stillwater before letting them go. The bats returned before she did. The third just sat there with a smug look on his face, smiling. Finally the others asked what he did. The third minister replied, "I knew what to do - I baptized them and confirmed them and I haven't seen them since.

There is a danger in making confirmation too much like school! We have problems if we think of confirmation as something like, say, calculus. I took calculus – and struggled through it. It was one of those “important” classes to take, so I took it. I am sure it helped me get into college, but I haven't used it since. In fact, a youth from my Delaware church asked if he could interview me. His high school math teacher had assigned them a project to select 4 or 5 adults they respected and interview them to find out how much math they used in their careers. I was honored to be selected and sheepish to admit that I did not use any functions that I learned in calculus in my normal work as a minister.

Confirmation is not like calculus. The confirmation class is just two weeks old and our participants have heard me say it a zillion times already – confirmation is an initiation, not a graduation. Confirmation is an initiation into participation in the life of the church, not a graduation out of it.

Confirmation is a time of asking the tough questions – questions that resist simplistic answers, questions that will continue to gnaw at us. It is part of the challenge of being human – living with confidence in a world that is more mysterious than we can ever comprehend with

absolute certainty. So the religious task is to make sense enough of our world to live with faith. So throughout our lives “we answer questions, and then question answers. We seek to challenge our understanding of the Scriptures and then let Scripture challenge our understanding in order to become more faithful.”¹ It is a circular process of answering questions and then questioning our answers. So, as we begin a confirmation class at Central, I thought it would be fun for us to look at some of those same topics for the next few weeks. So, confirmation – not just for kids. In the next few weeks we will explore: why church and what is faith. Today, though, we start with one of the most basic of questions: who is God?

It may sound like a simple question – but it is not. My friend Paul Capetz, who teaches theology at United Seminary here in the Twin Cities recently wrote a book titled, God: A brief History. It was published as part of a pocketbook series. A brief history. Just 64 pages but lots of big words and philosophical contexts. Who is God? The question is not as simple as it may sound, especially in our culture where the word God is increasingly tossed around in our political and cultural world.

We do not have time today to read even a short theology book nor can we survey the entire Bible, but let us look at a few approaches to answering this basic question of who is God.

Gary Larson is perhaps one of my favorite theologians, although I don’t know if he would consider himself a theologian. He is the cartoonist who created “The Far Side,” an odd world in which cows speak and scientists are mad, and life is a bit twisted. In one of my favorite cartoons, he pictures God as an old man with a long, flowing white beard sitting at a computer. There are television monitors all around him and God’s hand is poised over a big key that says, “Smite.” God as a person who takes great delight in watching events unfold and wreaking wrath and punishment from afar.

A second approach to God was very familiar in the time of the so-called Enlightenment. Interestingly enough, as the United States Supreme Court is investing considerable authority in what the framers of our constitution supposedly believed, we should be aware that for many of them, God was not a factor, neither in secular governments nor even in the day-to-day world. Many were deists – the believed that God created the world but then stepped out of the way. Like an engineer or a mechanic, they believed that God set the world in motion, much like building a clock machinery and setting it ticking, but then retired and let the laws of nature go into effect without interruption or interference. A once-active creator God who has been absent ever since.

A third approach has almost the opposite understanding of God. That nothing happens without God’s knowing and doing. Think of a football player, who after scoring a touchdown, and doing an awkward proud dance, then suddenly kneels down and points up into the sky. And after the game, the player publicly thanks God for choosing to give him the strength and agility and helping him those 6 points to win the game. Thanks, God, for being on our side and caring about us – we couldn’t have won the game without you.

Each of these approaches to God can find examples in the Bible and in the history of theology. But each has its limitations, quite obviously.

And so the question comes back to us again. How do we imagine a power and presence that admittedly is invisible and honors the mysteriousness of God?

One way is to use superlative adjectives: biggest, best, highest. Another way is to honor the variety of images used to describe God in the Bible. The Bible uses many different metaphors and similes to describe God. Some of which we discussed in our children's time today. God is, or God is like: the good shepherd, a father, a mother hen guarding the chicks, a wise judge, a rock, a cloud. Metaphors, similes and analogies may be the closest we can get to understanding God on our own terms. We know a bit about what shepherds do. We have seen good fathers love their children. We have seen mothers be fiercely protective of their young. We hope that we will encounter wise and fair judges if we find ourselves in a courtroom. We understand the permanence of rocks as well as the ephemeral beauty of clouds that are constantly changing shape.

But we should be mindful of a classic critique of religion that it is human nature to make God in our image. Beware, writer Anne Lamott says often, if your God thinks just like you and dislikes only the people you dislike! That isn't God.

And yet, imagine God we must if we are to make sense of who we are and why we are here. But the warnings are good. We ought to take care that we do not domesticate or trivialize God, something that seems to be happening in our culture all too often. In the Judeo-Christian tradition there is the recognition that there is something holy even in the name of God. It might be wise to remember the Jewish tradition of not pronouncing the sacred name for the Lord. Even different vowels are used to protect the sacred consonants of the name revealed to Moses in the burning bush.

In the Jewish calendar, today is Purim,² a festival that remembers and celebrates the trickery of Esther in helping the Jewish community avoid annihilation at the hands of the Persian king Ahasuerus. Interestingly enough, in the scripture text that tells the story of this triumph, God does not even appear. And yet, Purim is a day that celebrates God's triumph through the activities of the community. Purim is a festival of dancing, merrymaking, and gladness. When I was in Delaware, I became close friends with the rabbi from a conservative synagogue. And I was honored to be invited each year to their Purim lunch. People came dressed in costumes, and the highlight of the day was sharing jokes. The Purim message is that laughter is healthy and helps us to better understand God.³

Today, in the Christian calendar, is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent has a decidedly different atmosphere than a Purim costume party. Lent often has a more somber feel. It is a season of reflection and penitence as we think of Jesus' last days. The disciples did not want to hear it, but Jesus kept trying to tell them and us that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and rejection.

For Christians who understand God to be revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Lent reminds us vividly that God suffers. That any understanding of God being above or immune to human suffering is incomplete, even dead wrong.

From both Purim and the beginning of Lent, two quite different events, the image of God becomes illuminated. God is not a passionless, unmoved remote being immune from our feelings and the events of the world. God is passionate, reveling in laughter, and prone to suffering with those who suffer. Who is God? A God who laughs and a God who suffers.

And, like all theological questions and provisional answers, we must ask a follow-up question. And that question is, so what? If God laughs with those who laugh and suffers with those who suffer, we are to imitate God and attempt to do the same.

Clearly, much more could be said on this topic. But that is why confirmation is not just for kids. See you next week.

¹ This phrasing is from the church information form for Lake Travis New Church Development in Austin, Texas.

² Oops – a correction. In 2006, Purim is on March 14. I apologize for the mistake. I stand by the larger point!

³ For a good overview of Purim, see www.holidays.net/purim/story2.htm