

“Confirmation Not Just For Kids: The Gift of Faith”

Sermon Preached by David D. Colby

Central Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10

This Spring, for the first time in several years, Central has a confirmation class – youth in 6th through 10th grades have been meeting for a month to reflect on some of the basic issues of faith. Confirmation classes used to be famous, or infamous, for demanding memorization of dates and creeds and Bible passages. But in recent years, as our understandings have changed about how youth best learn, churches have come to realize that there is a danger in making confirmation too much like a school class. School classes, after all, conclude with finals, and eventually graduation. And our confirmation participants and their parents 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. I was delighted last week to have a number of adults join the class for a Jeopardy Game Show like quiz on the Bible – their presence helped to make this “quiz” fun and made it clear that we are all on a journey of faith, and together we will help form questions and answers.

In these last four weeks, we have been looking at some of these basic questions of the Christian faith during this sermon series, “Confirmation – Not Just for Kids.” Who is God? Why church? Last week, Christian values and the “foolishness of faith,” compared to the values that our culture prizes. Each of these topics leads to other questions, and finally, they lead to perhaps the most basic question of all: what does it mean to have faith? How do we know if we have faith, or, how do we get more faith?

We live in a fascinating time. When I was in college studying the intersections of religion, politics, and history, the prevailing assumption was that globalization would lead to an increased secularization, with particular faiths having less ability to impact events. Globalization, it was assumed, would lead to a more generic, more private faith. Having studied the religious roots of the civil rights movement in America, it was also assumed that where religion was still powerful, it would be a liberating factor, spreading human rights and justice to ever-expanding groups of people. How naïve we were about the role of faith.

Who ever could have foreseen twenty years ago that riots would erupt around the globe over cartoons of the prophet Muhammed published in a newspaper in Denmark? Who ever

could have foreseen an American religious leader calling for the assassination of a democratically elected leader of another country?

In this period of intense globalization, while the world may have become much smaller and, to use the term Tom Friedman has coined, flatter, faith if anything, has become more particular, more obvious, more important. As we travel through the streets and neighborhoods of the Twin Cities different expressions of faith stand out. Women wearing the hijab, or veil as Islamic immigrants create a new life here in the Twin Cities. Orthodox Jewish men with long flowing beards walking to the synagogue on Friday nights. White Protestant clergy taking the lead on opposing sides of the most divisive wedge issues in state capitols – whether the state should ban the possibility of recognizing civil unions or marriages between gay couples here in Minnesota, and in South Dakota, debating whether abortion is always wrong and should now be a matter of state prohibition rather than a private religious decision.

I was dumbfounded to hear during a Presbytery debate two fellow Presbyterian ministers declare that they never preached on political issues. First, our forebears in the faith, Jesus, Paul, Martin Luther, John Calvin would be rolling over in their graves or up in heaven or wherever they are. Faith is about how we live our lives, and that, is bound to involve cultural, economic, and political matters. Instead of faith becoming a purely private, minor matter (and to much great surprise) faith matters.

But what, exactly, is faith? This is, of course, a sermon series on some of the big questions for Christians. I hope you don't come here expecting a systematic treatise that answers all your questions that is academically airtight, as well as helpful for our daily lives. That would take too many pages of a sermon manuscript, too many footnotes. And perhaps I teased you by talking about other religions – comparing religious traditions could be a topic in itself. I asked my wife Laura somewhat jokingly if a twenty page sermon was too long. You will be glad to know she said, “stick with four pages – that's our limit.” So, staying within our Reformed tradition (and sticking as close to four pages as possible), let us explore a crucial question for us – what is faith, and how do people get it, and what should faith lead to?

Before we reflect on what faith is – and perhaps, to put it crassly – how we can get some of that faith, and what we should do with it, let me draw an important contrast.

First of all, faith is not certainty. Faith is not the same thing as a scientific, provable set of propositions. Faith is not the same thing as knowing facts. Theologian Paul Tillich perhaps put it best in a little book written in 1957 called *Dynamics of Faith*. Faith, first of all, he wrote, is the state of being ultimately concerned. And in true faith, ultimate concern is about that which is truly ultimate.² Which leads to Tillich's main point,

that faith is certain in so far as it is an experience of the holy. But it is uncertain in so far as the infinite to which it is related is received by a finite being. This element of uncertainty in faith cannot be removed, it must be accepted. And, [Tillich concludes] the element in faith which accepts this is courage.³

Faith is not the same as certainty. Or, as the man who came to Jesus seeking healing for his son cried out, “I believe, help my unbelief!”⁴ And it turns out that was good enough for Jesus. He healed the boy. No more demands of believing. Faith and doubt are not opposites. Faith does not explain everything that is mysterious and drown out all questions or overwhelm all objections. It’s not Easter yet, but an example of this that always sticks in my craw was hearing someone, a relatively new and overzealous Christian, trying to PROVE that Jesus was resurrected using a deadly combination of prooftexted biblical quotes, bad science, and some mathematical formula about the shroud of Turin that I didn’t get. To the kids she was teaching, she tried to make faith a matter of certainty, and if they didn’t agree with her, they were not only unfaithful, but stupid.

Instead, hear the wisdom of Saint Augustine – “if you think you understand, it isn’t God.” We cannot know all there is to know of God. Faith is not the same thing as certainty, and it is wise to be suspicious of anyone who claims to have all the answers. Faith is more like trusting than believing, and requires both courage as well as an acceptance that we are finite creatures reflecting on an infinite reality greater than our minds can imagine. As Cynthia Campbell, the president of McCormick Theological Seminary once put it, there comes a time in almost all our lives that we need to cross our fingers at some part of the creeds we recite together. Faith does not shut off our questions, but allows us to explore them with courage.

And because faith is more about trusting than certainty, faith ought to allow for some flexible boundaries, rather than demanding rigid barriers defining who is in and who is out. Religion, as any rebellious teenager can be quick to point out, is the source of most of the wars and conflicts in the world. And any time people are arguing about an ultimate reality, conflict takes on an ultimate level as well where compromise is seen as betrayal and so a win at all cost mentality takes hold. But ought not faith be a bit more humble, a bit more open to the wisdom and insights of others, pointing more to the kingdom of God than used as a finger pointer against other humans? As our passage from Ephesians says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing . . . so . . . no one may boast.” Faith ought to be humble.

But how do we get faith in the first place? Knowing as I do that there are a number of people who grew up in traditions other than Presbyterianism here, let me address something head-on. As one of our recent new members put it in an inquirers class last year – what is it about you Presbyterians and predestination? Predestination – this sticky wicket of a theological concept that says some people are simply predestined by God to have faith and be saved. Where it gets sticky is that back in the reformation and post-reformation period, systematic theologians took a second step of then saying that well, other people must be predestined by God to not have faith, to be consigned to a faithless existence.

Our book group recently read the novel *Gilead*, about a dying Congregational minister. And I loved a scene in which he was confronted by a younger man who had been rejected by the church who was not afraid to ask tough questions.

Jack broke in and said to me, “So, Reverend, I would like to hear your views on the doctrine of predestination.

Now that is probably my least favorite topic of conversation in the entire world. I have spent a great part of my life hearing that doctrine talked up and down, and no one's understanding ever advanced one iota. I've seen grown men, God-fearing me, come to blows over that doctrine. The first thought that came to my mind was, Of course he would bring up predestination!

So I said, "That's a complicated issue."

"Let me simplify it," he said. "Do you think some people are intentionally and irretrievably consigned to perdition?"

"Well, I said, "that may actually be the kind of simplification that raises more questions than it avoids."

He laughed. "People must ask you about this all the time," he said.

"They do."

"Then I suppose you must have some way of responding."⁵

My first answer to this person's question was that Presbyterians get credited or blamed for this concept, but Lutherans and Methodists have a shared history in this belief. My second response was saying that Presbyterian founder John Calvin, while assuming validity that some are predestined by God for faith and salvation and others are predestined to not have faith and salvation – Calvin's advice was to not worry about it, and assume that you are of the elect. Don't get all caught up in what can become a self-centered angst about your faith and salvation, instead trust that God has embraced you already and figure out how best to respond.

And Calvin's and my thoughts on how we get faith and what we are to do about it are shaped by passages from the Bible, including the one for today. This is one of the great texts on what has come to be called the doctrine of "justification by faith" – that says our faith is a gift from God, not something we can earn or do or get on our own powers.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

There is a revolutionary aspect, a gracefulness, in trusting that faith is a gift from God. Knowing that faith and grace are gifts from God, we are allowed to be humble servants rather than crusaders, open to other insights and questions rather than leaping to debate and refute.

Again from her book *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson has the dying minister reflect on the meaning of life and faith. He uses the theological term *prevenient*, a fancy word that simply means coming before. The Reverend John Ames says,

Theologians talk about a *prevenient* grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a *prevenient* courage that allows us to be brave – that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm. And therefore, this courage allows us, as the old men said, to make ourselves useful. It allows us to be generous, which is another way of saying exactly the same thing.⁶

It is all a gift. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and it is all a gift from God. Trust in that gift of God. Don't be afraid of good questions, and don't go pointing fingers at others; instead, be brave, acknowledge beauty and then focus on the good works for which we have been created. It is all a gift.

That is it. The end of this confirmation sermon series. But don't expect to get a cap and gown. Make no mistake, confirmation is not a graduation, but an initiation deeper into the life of faith. May it be so for all of us. Amen.

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

² Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957) 1, 12.

³ Ibid., 16.

⁴ Mark 9:24

⁵ Marilynne Robinson, Gilead (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) 149-150.

⁶ Ibid., 246.