

“Confirmation as Improvisation”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
April 27, 2008  
Scripture: Jonah 1:1-17 and Mark 8:27-38

Our neighbor, master storyteller Garrison Keillor said that:

It was Confirmation Sunday at Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church. Thirteen young people had their faith confirmed and were admitted to the circle of believers, thirteen dressed-up boys and girls at the altar rail in front of a crowd of every available relative. Pastor Inqvist asked them all the deepest questions about the faith (questions that have troubled theologians for years), which these young people answered readily from memory and then partook of their first communion. Later they lounged around on the front steps and asked each other, “Were you scared?” and said, “No, I really wasn’t, not as much as I thought I’d be,” and went home to eat chuck roast, and some of them had their first real cup of coffee. They found it to be a bitter oily drink that makes you dizzy and sick to your stomach, but they were Lutherans now and that’s what Lutherans drink.<sup>1</sup>

Confirmation in Lake Wobegon, where the thirteen confirmands were asked questions about faith and answered them from memory.

Confirmation has changed over the decades. It used to be thought that the purpose of confirmation was primarily to acquire enough knowledge. So confirmation classes filled the brains of youth with dates in church history, verses from and facts about the Bible, and theological doctrine – answers to those “deepest questions of faith that have troubled theologians for years.” Confirmation then culminated in an exam that consisted of standard questions provided by the catechism, followed by the correct answers supplied by the youth. If one knew enough, one could be a member of the church.

Two weeks ago during the confirmation class, we were talking about baptism and communion. And I turned in our Book of Confessions to the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards approved by the English Parliament in the 1600s. And I turned to question #162, What is a sacrament? I wanted to emphasize the rather beautiful answer that the two sacraments of baptism and confirmation are a “holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church, to signify, seal and exhibit” . . . grace. But the class could not get past the fact that this was question #162. How many questions are there? they wondered. (For those who are wondering, there are one hundred and ninety-six questions.)

There were definite advantages to this approach for learning. People used to know the Bible much better, and in times of trouble, could remember a helpful Psalm off the top of their head. There was more clarity about what it meant to be a Presbyterian, as opposed to a Lutheran or a Methodist. Some basic training in theological thinking is a pretty good thing, I believe, for all people who claim to be a Christian.

But times have changed and so has confirmation. People who study the ways we learn and think say that all of us, young and old alike, face an explosion of information. We are exposed to

more facts than we can process. “Information overload,” it is called. So when I forget my anniversary date, or while giving a tour of this church forget the year the church was founded, or cannot cite the last four digits of my social security number, I blame it on having to know too much information. Luckily, for most of us the correct answers to any question we face are usually just a few mouse clicks away. What has become important is not knowing all or enough of the available information, but knowing how to know and learning how to continue learning. Asking the right questions and then working to answer those questions.

Thinking musically – with our jazz concert coming up tonight – confirmation is not about learning one important piece of music and memorizing it by heart and performing it upon command. Instead, confirmation as improvisation. Knowing the melody and rhythm and then arranging and rearranging the parts, watching the scene to know what is needed now. Faith, I believe, is like that. Faith does not provide all the answers – it requires that we improvise. Two major examples of faith requiring improvisation are before us as a church right now.

A few weeks ago, I attended a meeting in Philadelphia. This big old church, situated nicely along the “Avenue of the Arts,” had just reopened its doors after years of being closed after the membership dwindled down to nothing. Huge building, with a sanctuary about as big as ours. Huge classrooms – one could seat several hundred people. And after years of decline, the members could no longer afford to keep the doors open. So they locked it up. They even took the handles off the outside of the doors. And it was just a huge vacant building not good for much of anything if it could not be a church. And it had been vacant for some time. Big chunks of plaster were falling down from the walls and pillars. Cobwebs everywhere. Bathrooms that looked like they were from the 1940s and smelled like it. But a group of healthy churches got together some funds and found a creative organizing pastor who has connections to the rich and powerful and a passion for the poor. And they opened those majestic doors into a community full of artists and art patrons and homeless persons. And a church that looks like no other church I know is emerging. With a homeless shelter open seven nights a week for the toughest cases - the people who refuse to go to other shelters. Church members sleep there – not as volunteers. And they have community meals sponsored by area restaurants that require you to sit next to people you do not know – meals in which rich investment bankers and people who had no other place to go shared their stories and passed plates of food. And they put together a staff of volunteers and almost volunteers that includes a “dean of cuisine,” and an “ambassador of welcome,” and a Dean for their “Center for Subversive Theology.” It is a cool emerging community improvising as they go along.

Some of my colleagues, who pastor large wealthy congregations could not imagine the challenges of dealing with crumbling walls, no committees, and no endowment. It was an inspiring experience to be there for a meeting, shivering because the boiler had gone out the night before. The youth of today will have many different options for what types of churches to participate in over the coming decades. The choices will be so much more than Lutheran or Presbyterian, suburban or downtown.

I was struck by the remarks of a colleague after the meeting who knows about us here at Central. He said to me, what they are doing in Philadelphia is cool all right – but you have a much harder task. Lots of people could start from scratch and take a falling down building and do good ministry and make fun of the memorial plaques. At Central, he said, you don’t get to start from

scratch. You cannot ignore or make fun of the past. There are some programs and events that will not seem cool to visitors but you cannot pretend they don't exist. You have to improvise, too, but with lots of parts being fixed. What you are doing, he said, is some of the most important church work in our time.

So churches today who want to meet the needs of our time, who want to reach out to people looking for a church, or include people who have been hurt by the church, or people so busy that they don't even realize they need or want the church have to improvise. There are no fixed checklists for success.

A second example of our need to improvise to put our faith into action became clear only recently. I met this week with an executive from the presbytery about how Central should respond to the death threats we received now that the case has been solved and we know the person who sent them. This executive, a really wise guy brought out of retirement for transitional leadership, said that in all his years he could not remember a case like this. He congratulated our Session for how we have handled the situation so far, then said – “there is no template for how to proceed now.” You will need to use the best legal advice, along with medical and psychological knowledge and good communication skills. But there are no step-by-step guidelines that will lead to a successful outcome for all involved. You will have to improvise.

That is for our work together – we will have to improvise to address this specific issue and the larger task of creating a church community that will have enduring meaning for the present and future. We will never have all the answers ahead of time. Our task is not to accumulate enough knowledge, but arrange and rearrange and continue to learn and ask the right questions.

It is a similar challenge for us as individuals. We build our faith lives, drawing on stories from the Bible, questions from friends, and the challenges and joys that life brings us. We take the beginnings of our stories, and look for similarities and guidance. Two weeks ago, I encouraged you, along with the members of the confirmation class, to read the book of Jonah and the Gospel of Mark so we can have some shared texts.

These books contain some of the most important aspects of our faith. The actions and teachings of Jesus. The work of prophets. Tough questions, like when the rich young man comes to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Rebellion like we see in Jonah, when God asks Jonah to go somewhere and Jonah immediately hops on a ship going in the opposite direction. Perhaps Jonah is the inspiration behind that much loved children's book, The Runaway Bunny that begins,

Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away.  
 So he said to his mother, “I am running away.”  
 “If you run away,” said his mother, “I will run after you.  
 For you are my little bunny.”  
 “If you run after me,” said the little bunny,  
 “I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you.”  
 “If you become a fish in a trout stream,” said his mother,  
 “I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.”<sup>2</sup>

Jonah's story is familiar to a lot of us, of rebellion and being pursued by God and it is a good story on which to improvise as we try to be faithful.

Part of the task during confirmation, and throughout our lives, is to come to an understanding of who we are and who or what God is. And then there is the big question: how does our identity and purpose intersect with God's identity and purpose? We see this in the passage from Mark today. Jesus asks the disciples who people are saying he is. And the disciples tell him what they have heard from others.

They answered him, "John the Baptist, and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah (Mark 8:28-29).

In those answers, we can see that those who first met Jesus were improvising – taking pieces of their theological heritage and trying to make sense of the present. Even when Peter got it right in calling Jesus the Messiah, Jesus found it necessary to correct him about what that meant. For Jesus, being the Messiah did not mean that he would not suffer and die. And faith in him did not mean that disciples would have it easy. "Those who want to save their life will lose it" he warned (Mark 8:35).

A life of faith requires an ongoing wonderment about who we are and what we are called to do to be faithful to an elusive God. And so, like a jazz musician, we take the starting melody, the opening notes, and then we find our way by improvisation. Taking simple starts, and foundational themes, and exploring new paths and overcoming obstacles. And those basic themes keep emerging, but with new depth and meaning. And when you lose your way improvising, or when you find yourself on the wrong shore like Jonah, the gospel truth is that you can always start over.

Karl Barth was a theological giant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote commentaries and a four-volume, twelve part, six thousand page Church Dogmatics that filled an entire shelf. He debated other theologians and fought against fascist ideology. He was an academic who preached in prison worship services. In 1962, toward the end of his career, he came to America for a lecture tour. After one lecture, a young student asked Barth if he could sum up what was most important about his life's work and theology in just a few words. There were gasps from the audience at the audacity of the question. Barth thought for a moment and then smiled, "Yes, in the words of a song my mother used to sing me, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."<sup>3</sup>

Not a bad starting place on which to improvise. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Garrison Keillor, "Aprille," in Leaving Home (New York: Penguin Books, 1997) 245.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Wise Brown, The Runaway Bunny (New York: HarperCollins, 2005 edition).

<sup>3</sup> This is a well-known and often told story. Two easily accessible citations, with a short biography of the work and significance of Barth can be found on the internet at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barth\\_Karl](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barth_Karl) and <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/special/131christians/barth.html>