

“Confirmation and Discipleship”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
May 4, 2008  
Scripture: Jonah 4:1-11 and Mark 1:16-20

Next Sunday is Confirmation Sunday here at Central. And we have a great group of eight kids who have been part of a confirmation class that has met throughout the year. In a church of our size, this is a big deal! Confirmation is not just about those eight kids, or the families of those eight kids. Confirmation impacts this entire church community.

Perhaps as a result of this sermon series, I have had many opportunities recently to hear from you about your confirmation experiences. One person told me that her parents did not tell her that she would be meeting with the session, because they were afraid that she was too shy, so they just caught her off guard! I have had the privilege of hearing your questions and stories about what it means to belong to a church community, and the theological issues you question, and the deep commitments and beliefs you hold. I love discussions like this. It has been a fertile time.

This is the third in a series of sermons on Confirmation: Not Just for Kids. I hope that it has been, or will be, a good opportunity to reflect on some big issues in living a faithful life. The first was about confirmation and (to use an expression Jesus used often) the kingdom of God. Last week, “Confirmation as Improvisation” rather than memorization or recitation. Today, I want to think about “Confirmation and Discipleship.” There is a slogan I say over and over to every confirmation group with whom I have worked, and I say it over and over to their parents, and I want you to hear it and believe it as well. Confirmation is not graduation.

Graduation is important, of course. A milestone. I am graduating this month in a doctoral program that I have been working on now for too many years. Having completed all the coursework, and the dreaded forms requiring a billion signatures, I am so looking forward to being officially done. Someone asked if I was planning a graduation party, and I said no plans for that yet. What I thought, though, was that as soon as it is official, I am going through an entire filing cabinet of required forms and formatting guidelines, and a billion versions of my final project and put most of it in the recycling bin. I cannot wait for graduation – to be done.

Confirmation sometimes gets taught like it is a school course. And I think there is a danger in making confirmation too much like school. Schools, after all, have graduation.

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. The first said he got so frustrated by the bats swooping around that one night, when no one was at church, he got out a shotgun and started shooting at them. He had some success, he scared them off for a little while, but it left holes in the roof and now he had leaks as well as bats. The second minister said that 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 minister just sat there with a smug look on his face, smiling. Finally the others asked what he did. He replied, “I knew what to do – I baptized them and confirmed them and I haven’t seen them since!”

Confirmation is not like that. Confirmation is not graduation. Confirmation is a time of exploration and learning, but confirmation Sunday does not mark the end of exploration or the end of learning or even a final decision about faith and identity and church membership. Far from it. Confirmation Sunday marks the beginning point. An initiation into this church, noting the accountability and maturity of the youth. And that is why I think it is important to emphasize that confirmation is not just for kids.

The point of faith, the point of preaching and teaching and prayer is not that people will join a particular church. I say that as we, in a few minutes, prepare to receive and welcome new members here at Central. The point is to encourage discipleship. Throughout the different seasons of our lives we will have different questions and different levels of maturity, and in each season, we must re-confirm our basic commitments to living a faithful life. Each day we wake up, really, we must decide how it is that we are going to live.

Often people who do not read it much assume that the Bible is about perfect people. That the characters who make it into the pages of Scripture are so holy, so good, that they serve as examples for all of us. Instead, the Bible is full of, at best, imperfect disciples. To shatter this illusion that the Bible is about perfect people remote from the lives and mistakes of people like us, I assign the book of Jonah to the Confirmation class and suggested it to you.

Jonah is a lot of things, but none could accuse him of being a perfect person, or someone so good and holy. In the four short chapters we see that Jonah is rebellious, self-righteous, argumentative and willing to pray only when he gets in trouble.

We see the rebellion immediately. God calls Jonah to go as a prophet to Ninevah and preach repentance. And Jonah rebels, taking the next ship out of town in the opposite direction. Then Jonah, in a fit of biblical comedy, gets swallowed by a large fish. And only there, in belly of the fish in the depths of the sea, only there does Jonah pray to God. God speaks to the fish, the Bible says, and the fish spews Jonah out onto dry land.

And then, the story begins over again. You might think that given a second chance, Jonah will get it right this time, with obedience and joy and humility. Well, it starts out that way. God asks Jonah to go again to Ninevah and proclaim to the city that

they must repent. And this time Jonah goes, and wouldn't you know, the entire city hears his message and repents of their evil ways. And God is pleased and "changed his mind" (3:10) about the punishment that had been promised.

And here we see a more complete picture of Jonah. He gets angry and sulks. He gets mad at God. "O Lord, Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." Coming from any other lips, this would seem to be praise of a wonderful God who is gracious and merciful and abounds with steadfast love. But Jonah is mad – these are fighting words! Why did you make me go all the way over here to Ninevah if you knew that you would forgive them? Why did you make me tell them they would be punished?

So Jonah sits down and sulks. "It is better for me to die than live," he says. And to the end of the story, Jonah remains angry enough with God to die. The only repentance we can see is that hinted at in the final line of the story. In the face of Jonah's anger, God says, "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

If God is forgiving and funny enough to forgive the animals and Ninevites, we are left with the sense that God can stick with Jonah until he is past his self-righteous angry phase. And that gives hope to the church, which has its share and then some of people who can sometimes act like Jonah.

While not as singular or exaggerated a story about failed discipleship, the gospel of Mark is, at least in part, a story about failed discipleship. Over and over, the twelve official disciples fail to understand Jesus due to a lack of understanding, lack of faith, and fear.<sup>1</sup> Some examples:

- The disciples participate in a miraculous feeding of the crowd gathered to hear Jesus. And the very next time there is a similar situation, they are afraid they will run out of food (Mark 8:4).
- In our story last Sunday, Peter, the impetuous disciples, says that Jesus is the Messiah. But then he runs his mouth and Jesus ends up saying to him, "Get behind me Satan!" (Mark 8:27-33).
- Jesus predicts his suffering and death – while just ahead of him the disciples are arguing over who was the greatest (Mark 10:32-40).
- On the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested, Jesus took disciples with him to the garden for support. While he prays in anguish, the disciples fall asleep (Mark 14:32-42).

I guess the point here is that discipleship has never been easy. For those of us who might say that if only Jesus were here right now, then we would be able to be really faithful, really good – well, take another look the gospel of Mark seems to say. Those who knew Jesus best faltered under pressure, succumbed to the temptation to argue over

The point of these stories, perhaps, or one point in these stories, is that God calls whomever God will call, including us. And through hearing of the failings of Jonah and Peter and all the rest, maybe we can get a bit of a competitive urge within us to be just a little better at following Jesus. Perhaps by hearing of the failings of disciples, we will not allow ourselves to be paralyzed into inaction, thinking that our small, risky steps might be short of perfect.

God still calls people to repent and believe in the good news. Jesus still calls people to follow him, to be disciples of the gospel. And the gospel gives meaning and purpose to our lives. To partner with God, who is so good, who offers forgiveness when Jonah rebelled against God's call and to the disciples when they fell asleep in the garden. A God so good who offers mercy to the Ninevites, king and cattle alike. A God so good that God is willing to go all the way to the cross, enduring taunting and betrayal and to show that love is stronger than death.

That is what this is all about – being faithful with all our hearts, and all of our strength, and all of our minds. Knowing that we will not be the first to falter. Knowing that mistakes and failings are to be expected, and have been forgiven.

It is not easy to be a faithful disciple of Jesus. The challenges will be hard, and life is messy. We need the prayers and support and wisdom of others. And so we band together, together seeking to be faithful, together discerning our calls, together offering God praise. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> David Rhoads and Donald Michie, Mark As Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 124.