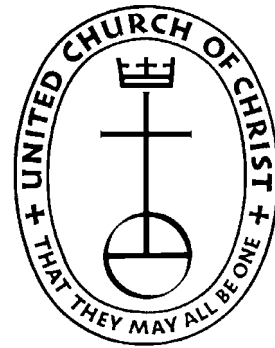


Being Confirmed – Beginning a Journey

A Sermon By —
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and
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May 23, 2010



This sermon on Confirmation Sunday was for the five young people being confirmed into membership of First Congregational Church and our denomination, the United Church of Christ. In being confirmed they joined a community of continual learning, spiritual nurture, outreach, caring through the changes in our lives.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Being Confirmed – Beginning a Journey

A Community of Continual Learning (Jerry Stinson)

Today's sermon is directed at the newly confirmed members – the rest of you can listen in.

You're done – all those Sunday afternoon confirmation classes are behind you; all the homework is finished. But in fact, that ending only opens the door to a new beginning. You are now adult members of a liberal Christian faith community. That means you are beginning a journey without an end, a lifelong pilgrimage.

The word "pilgrim" is important in the United Church of Christ. The 17th-century Pilgrims who landed in Plymouth were our denomination's forebears. Our church camp is called Pilgrim Pines; our retirement home in Claremont is Pilgrim Place; our church's publishing house is Pilgrim Press. We are a pilgrim people.

Our "Call to Celebration" today said we are travelers making our way. We are each on our own spiritual journey, but the wonder of a faith community is that we make those individual journeys nurtured and supported by others.

Today you become part of a community of continual learning. Ours is not the kind of church where we hand you a book with the "correct" answers to all of life's questions. You are going to have to search for those answers yourself.

Jesus was an incredible teacher who didn't offer a set of doctrines to be believed or a set of right answers to life's most difficult questions. Instead, he told stories – often open-ended stories. He helped people search for their own answers; the story as a guide.

From this pulpit, Libby and I do not tell our members what they must believe. No, we simply share our own faith journey – what we believe to be true at this point in our lives. We do that hoping that it will help others search for their own answers to questions about the meaning and purpose of life.

So I challenge you today as new pilgrims on the journey of faith, keep growing in your faith. Keep asking questions and don't be afraid of the really difficult ones. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Don't be afraid to admit that there is mystery all around us and that there is little certainty in life.

And at the same time, rejoice that you don't have to ask the questions by yourself. The church is a whole community of people raising the same questions, making the same journey. So engage in conversation with others, find out what they believe, learn about their experiences – while at the same time sharing with them what you believe and what you've experienced. Know that we can learn from others who perhaps see life differently than we do.

Look at the wisdom of other religious traditions. See what you can learn from those traditions that will enrich your own faith.

And don't be afraid if at times you don't seem to believe much of anything; times when you question whether there is a God or any meaning to life. All our faith journeys take us through valleys as well as across mountain tops. When we enter a dark and confusing valley, that's when we can lean on others in the community and let them help us keep on with the pilgrimage.

Today you become pilgrims in a community of continual learning.

A Community of Spiritual Nurture (Libby Tigner)

What makes you laugh? What makes you cry? What are you afraid of? What is your deepest secret? Deep down inside, who are you? What is it that makes a "good person"? What are the things in life that really matter? What is prayer, and how do you do it? How do you touch, how do you connect to, the sacred mystery of life?

Jerry said just a minute ago that you need not be afraid to admit that there is mystery all around us. Engaging that mystery, and really opening up your heart to all of the questions about the meaning of life and your place in the world are all a part of our spiritual journeys; by becoming members of the church today, you are becoming members of a community that will also try to be a place of spiritual exploration and support.

In most religions, there are symbols and rituals that point to how the community understands God and what is sacred. The ritual that you just participated in, confirmation, included Jerry and me putting our hands on your heads. That is a symbol of the prayers and the blessings and the love of God and of the people of this church for you being placed on you, given to you. It is a sign of how much you are loved and affirmed here today.

On the communion table, you see the bread and the cup of juice. In a few min-

utes, we'll all eat and drink those elements, signs of how our faith feeds us and nourishes us, and ties us to Christian communities all around the world and through the past, present and future.

Some of you, over the years, as acolytes, have lit the two tall candles or the peace candle that are on the communion table. Clearly, we don't light those three candles because they are providing extra light for us to read our bulletin or see who is singing. We light the peace candle as a reminder of our hope for peace from armed conflict all around the world, but especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. And most churches light candles on Sundays as a symbol of God's light of understanding and grace and love that come to us in our prayers, our songs, our liturgy, and in the sermons.

What makes church different from school or clubs or scouts or sports or any other group or organization that you may be a part of is that the primary reason that we are here is because we recognize that there is something that is holy and sacred about life, and we want to name it, if we can, and live our lives in ways that honor that sacred nature of our being. Some of us call that sacredness "God." Some of us call it something else. Some us don't have a name for it, but know that it exists.

You are now members of a community of spiritual support. In this spiritual home, we hope that you will be safe to ask your most difficult and challenging questions, to find language that fits your understanding of God, and find meaning in the symbols and rituals that say always, over and over, "you are a beloved child of God."

A Community of Outreach (Jerry)

A church member's journey is made in a community of continual learning, of spiritual support and of outreach. Margaret Bixby's passion for liberal Christianity led to the creation of this congregation. When this beautiful building was finished in 1914, she said it was "designed for worship, but built for service." She knew that what we do in this sacred space on Sundays equips us to go out into a wounded world to serve our neighbors.

The Hebrew prophet Amos said that above all God wants us to let justice flow down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Another prophet, Micah, said God wants us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

I think religious faith, within the context of that which is greater than we are, is about trying to find what brings meaning and purpose to life. And the biblical narratives make it clear that it is only when we reach out and help others, it is only when we

work to create just and peaceful societies, it is only when we refuse to allow our brothers and sisters to be mired in poverty and hopelessness – it is only then that we find deep meaning in life.

It is as we serve food at the Drop-In Center on Sunday afternoon, it is as we walk together raising money in the CROP Walk to combat hunger, it is as we walk together in the Martin Luther King parade calling for racial justice and in the Pride Parade seeking to end discrimination based on a person's God-given orientation – it is only as we do those things that we find meaning.

Your confirmation puts you on a road of service and advocacy. You are beginning a counter-cultural journey where you must sometimes put the needs of others ahead of your own, where you struggle to root out any prejudices harbored in your own hearts, where you truly care deeply about all of God's children and are willing to share the resources of God's creation with them.

And I suspect you will find that reaching out to others, building a better world – that that's what will make you happy; that's what will bring fulfillment; that's what will help you make sense of life. So today, we welcome you into a community of outreach.

A Community of Caring Through the Changes in Our Lives (Libby)

And last, but certainly not least, we welcome you into a community of caring – a community that we hope will nurture you and support you and those you love through the many changes in our lives.

You are now full-fledged, adult members of this church. This is only one of many rites of passage, of life-changes, that you will experience as you grow older. In the next few years, we will recognize you as you graduate from high school, and maybe college. You might get married – perhaps some of you will get married in this sanctuary. Some of you were baptized here; it's also possible that your children will be baptized here.

No matter what paths you decide to take in your careers and with your loved ones, there is one guarantee: things will change. You'll fall in love, you'll have your heart broken. You face hard decisions and deep disappointments. You will have moments of unspeakable joy. You'll move from where you are living now, and you'll go through periods of finding yourself and starting over. People close to you will die. You will celebrate new babies that are born.

These are the realities of being alive – and the good thing is, that you don't have

to do any of it alone. This congregation made a promise to you, and it does to every child who is baptized here. And the promise stands, no matter who you are or what is going on in your life, no matter who the minister is, no matter what people join or leave this church.

This is a community of caring – a group of people that takes seriously our call from God to love each other. That means standing by you when times are tough, celebrating with you in your successes, grieving with you in loss, and challenging you to always be the very best human being – the most honest, the most compassionate, the most generous – that you can possibly be.

Early in the service, just before you were confirmed, we all read this together:

Our vision is to be a reconciling community of faith welcoming all persons, and a shalom community of faith committed in the way of Jesus to the struggle for justice, compassion and life-giving spirituality for all people. Our mission is to witness, in and through our life together, to the good news that the way of God is in our midst, and the journey is our home.

We welcome you to the journey; and may God's blessing be with us all as we travel together. Amen.