

Confirmed

1 Samuel 1: 24-28

05 01 2011 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Confirmation Sunday

Introduction

When I first entered the ministry, I always thought it would be “interesting” to oversee a **church construction project**. Be careful what you pray for! I have been involved in FOUR major building programs in the last twelve years.

I did the math last week. The last two churches I’ve served have spent about \$11.4 million in new construction or renovation. So I have gained quite an education on the subject.

Minor construction is like minor surgery—there is no such thing if you are personally involved. And neither one is pretty halfway through the process! Every development involves a thousand different details and decisions. Any building project is a massive undertaking.

A major milestone in the construction of a high-rise occurs when the top floor of a building is completed. Contractors traditionally hold a **“topping off” or a “topping out” party** for the entire crew. Typically, a tree is placed on top of the building as part of the celebration. There is still a lot left to do, however, the building is beginning to take shape. Everyone pauses to celebrate what has been accomplished before getting back to work.

I. Confirmation Sunday

This morning we are celebrating **“Confirmation Sunday.”** Our youth have joined the church and publicly professed their faith in Jesus Christ. In a way, Confirmation is the church’s version of a **“topping off” party**. These young adults have been under construction for the past twelve or thirteen years.

- ❖ **Parents:** Twelve years of diapers, 2:00 a.m. feedings, sniffly noses, strep throats, “I think I’m going to be sick” right after she is, dance recitals, scout meetings, ball games, bedtime prayers, birthdays, Christmases, and vacations.
- ❖ **Church:** Twelve years of nursery, children’s church, Sunday School classes, Vacation Bible School, choirs, puppets, Christmas pageants, and acolytes.
- ❖ **Youth:** Twelve years of squirming in your seats, running around at family night suppers, sharing family secrets during children’s sermons, asking questions, getting answers, asking more questions, not always getting answers, and asking still more questions.

After all this time and effort, these young people have been confirmed in the Christian faith as full and responsible members of the church. However, we recognize that Confirmation is neither the beginning nor the end. Like all of us, these youth are works-in-progress.

A “topping off” party occurs sometime between the start and finish, initiation and completion, groundbreaking and ribbon cutting. There is still a lot of work left to be done. These young men and women will continue to grow and mature in their faith.

II. Confirmation

Some here may not be familiar with the rite of **Confirmation**. This is an ancient tradition of the church as youth and adults publicly profess their faith in Christ and join the church. Confirmation is the culmination of a long process for these young people. They have been through a year-long Confirmation experience where they explored the major beliefs of the Christian faith. They also spent President’s Day weekend at Saint Simon’s Island along with other field trips and service projects.

In the Jewish faith, boys at age 13 and girls at age 12 are recognized as adults. The occasion is celebrated with a party called a bar or bat mitzvah. The Hebrew words literally mean “son or daughter of the commandment.”

In a similar way, we recognize that our confirmands have reached an age of accountability and are responsible for their own spiritual decisions. Their parents and the church have raised them in faith; however, they must claim the Christian faith as their own. Confirmation is an important milestone along the way.

1) Each of us comes to faith in our own way. The southern church has a rich heritage of evangelical Christianity, revivalism, and camp meetings. Many members here became Christians by “walking the aisle” at the end of a worship service. It was a highly emotional and spiritual mountaintop experience in your life.

Others, however, came into the Christian faith over a longer period of time. You may not be able to say exactly when you accepted Christ as your Savior. I’ve heard some people say, “I don’t remember a time when I wasn’t a Christian.”

The apostle Paul encountered the risen Lord in a dramatic vision on the Road to Damascus. Some of the disciples unknowingly walked with Jesus on the Road to Emmaus. Some people have Damascus Road experiences, and others have Emmaus Road experiences. One is not better than the other—simply different.

There is no such thing as “*cookie cutter Christianity*.” We enter God’s kingdom in a rich variety of ways. It is a bit like falling in love. Some experience love at first sight; others begin as friends and slowly drift into love.

In my own spiritual journey, I was baptized as an infant and confirmed in seventh grade. However, I became a Christian on a youth retreat at Camp Glisson and later felt God’s call to the ordained ministry at a Sunday night worship service. All of these events were important moments in my spiritual journey.

Confirmation recognizes that our faith journey is both event and process, milestones and miles. We celebrate the confirmands’ faith in three tenses:

- ❖ Past: Confirm what has already been done.

- ❖ Present: Recognize God’s grace acting in their lives here and now
- ❖ Future: Anticipate what the Holy Spirit will continue to do.

2) Some are concerned that these youth do not truly understand the vows they have made today. I couldn’t agree more. We *never* understand at first what our vows and promises will entail. Examples:

- ❖ When I was **ordained** as a United Methodist minister, the bishop asked: “*Are you willing to make the sacrifices necessary for the ministry?*” I answered “Yes” without a second thought. However, I was twenty-two years old at the time and didn’t have a clue what those sacrifices might be.
- ❖ During a Christian **marriage**, a couple vows “*for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.*” They say these words with confidence and a smile. I guarantee you that they don’t know what they’re getting themselves into! On their silver or gold anniversary, they will have a better understanding of the promises they made.
- ❖ In **Confirmation** today, we asked these youth: “*Do you promise according to the grace given you to live a Christian life and always remain a faithful member of Christ’s holy church?*” And they answered “I do” without hesitation. Yet these vows will be tested in the months and years ahead.

The reality is that our promises are ALWAYS tentative and preliminary. We have to grow into our promises. Yet the promises shape who we become.

III. The Confirmation Covenant

A. Confirmation Promises

The youth may not fully understand the vows they made, but they intuitively understand that they have made significant, life-altering promises. All who have been baptized and joined the church made similar vows. Perhaps the promises you made were not phrased exactly like the ones in the service today; but the underlying intent and content were the same. Hear what these youth have promised and recall your own vows.

1) *Do you in the presence of God and this congregation renew the solemn vow and promise made at your baptism?*

Some of our youth were baptized as infants. Their parents promised to live lives of Christian example, bring them up in the faith, teach them the Scriptures, instruct them in the private and public worship of God, and keep them under the ministry and guidance of the church until they should accept for themselves the gift of salvation and be confirmed as full and responsible members of Christ’s holy Church.

Others of our youth were baptized for the first time today. Their hair is still wet with the waters of baptism. Baptism is a sacrament that is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It is a rite of initiation when God claims us as his own and we become part of Christ’s church.

2) ***Do you truly and earnestly repent of your sins and accept Jesus Christ as your Savior?***

The first part of the question may seem the easiest of the bunch. “*Do you truly and earnestly repent of your sins?*” I mean, just how much serious sinning can a sixth or seventh grader have done? Well, ask their parents—you might be surprised!

The spiritual reality is that we have ALL sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Our sinfulness is not the sum total of our individual sins but the broken relationship humanity experiences with God. Repentance means that we turn from our sins and towards holiness.

Then we experience God’s forgiveness. While we were yet sinners, Christ Jesus died for us. All those who accept him as Savior and Lord receive forgiveness of their sin and the gift of life eternal. Of all the vows these young people make, the most significant comes in response to the question: “*Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior?*”

3) ***“Do you believe in God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit?”***

This question echoes the Apostles Creed. We profess a belief in the triune God who is experienced as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Almighty is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

4) ***“Do you receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?”***

When I was confirmed, I lied about this answer! Well, “lied” may be too strong a word. “Fudged” might be better. I did not realize I was doing so at the time. Neither does anyone else. Truth to tell, most young people and adults do not KNOW what is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. Engage in a life time of study. Will wrestle and struggle to understand. Lifelong encounter.

5) ***“Do you promise, according to the grace given you, to live a Christian life and always remain a faithful member of Christ’s holy church?”***

Chances are some of them won’t. Look around today. We are a 1,500 member church. Yet we average about 600 in worship. Most congregations have about one-third of their membership present on any given Sunday . . . unless it is a holiday, vacation, Daylight Savings time change, raining, or they have something better to do!

Despite our refusals, doubts, and wanderings, God’s grace does not let us go. He is like the woman searching for her lost silver coin. Like the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep in the fold to search for his one lost lamb. Like a loving father anxiously awaiting his prodigal son’s return. God is head over heels in love with his creation and will not let us be.

6) ***“Will you be loyal to the United Methodist Church and uphold it with your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness?”***

In the past few years, I've taken it upon myself to change these words. Will you be loyal to Christ's Church and support it We are not asking them to pledge allegiance to the United Methodist denomination but to Christ's church. Some of these youth will eventually go to other churches. Some, gasp, might not even be United Methodist. But our identity is as Christians who respond to God's call with the stewardship of our lives.

B. The Church's Promise

The confirmands have made some important promises today. But they are not alone. Their church family has also made a significant vow. We pledged to support you in your Christian journey.

None of us do this on our own. The Christian faith is a team sport—no one plays alone. These young people bring gifts and talents that are a vital part of the church's ministry. In turn, your church family will support you in good times and bad.

C. God's Promise

The most meaningful promises today, however, are made by God. Promised to be our God and we will be his people. Forgiveness for sins. Everlasting life. Claimed these young people as his own.

Although I have emphasized the promises we make, the reality is that Confirmation in particular and salvation in general is what God does for us.

God confirms us. And while we sometimes break the promises we make, God's Word endures forever.

Conclusion

In our Scripture lesson today from 1 Samuel, Hannah brought her young son to God's temple. She said to the priest, Eli:

"As surely as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord. I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord."
(1 Samuel 1: 26-28)

We come today to do the very same thing. We present our sons and daughters, brothers and sisters in Christ to the Lord's service.

Confirmation is neither an ending nor a beginning. Instead, it is an important milestone along the way. Today we celebrate a "topping off party" in recognition of past accomplishment. We also anticipate their future progress as they continue to grow in the Lord. Today we lift up these young people in prayer. And we entrust them to the Lord.

Amen.