

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
May 20, 2012
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Psalm 1

Dear Katy, Henry and Helen,

Today is a big day for you in your journey of faith. It's the day you personally get to confirm the promises your parents made for you when you were baptized. It's a big day for this congregation, too, because it's not often we get to share in this important passage. I want you to know that everyone here is very proud of you. It has been a blessing for me to be your teacher this past year and to watch you grow and mature and begin to articulate what it is you believe.

As I taught you this past year, there were many times I reflected on my own confirmation class. It was taught by Dr. Eberts, who was the senior pastor of my home church. Dr. Eberts was a true Presbyterian scholar, and it is to him, I believe, that I owe many of my foundational beliefs about what it means to be a Presbyterian.

My confirmation was the culmination of a yearlong class that was divided into four sections: the nature and structure of the Presbyterian Church, and God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. We, too, wrote statements of faith. And on confirmation Sunday, I read the statement of faith I wrote about Christ . . . just like Helen will today.

My confirmation class was large, probably 20 or so kids, most of whom never darkened the doors of the church after that Sunday. Maybe they came back after they had kids of their own, but more often than not in those days and these days, kids don't. Henry, Helen and Katy, I hope you won't be one of those kids. Because contrary to what you may think, confirmation is not a graduation ceremony from the church.

If you do think this, that today is some sort of graduation ceremony, it's certainly no fault of your own. The church-and by church I mean churches in general-have historically treated confirmation as a graduation ceremony. We give you certificates, cake, maybe even a token gift, all of which resemble a graduation. Then, we ask you to make a public statement and tell us, at the young age of 13 and 14, what you have concluded about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and perhaps the church universal. When we do that, I think we give off the impression that what you believe today is what you will believe for a lifetime OR that your education as a Christian is complete.

And that, Henry, Katy and Helen, could not be further from the truth. The Christian education you've received to this point, and the knowledge you'll share with us in just a few minutes, are only the beginning. Your beliefs-I hope-will grow and mature and change a great deal in your lifetime. The statement about Christ that I wrote and read for my confirmation (?), well I came across it a few years ago when cleaning my office. It

was a solid, well thought out statement of faith-for a 15 year old. Don't get me wrong, it was a good foundation-but that's all it was-a foundation.

So think about your statements and what you believe today as a foundation-nothing more, and nothing less. Liken them, if you will, to building a house. You've done some excavating and poured the foundation. But if you end here, you don't have enough to carry you through life.

You need more. You need walls and windows and furnishings. As you grow and mature, so will your knowledge about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, the Bible and the world. You'll start forming your own beliefs and opinions about these subjects, separate and distinct from your parents' beliefs, so that on your foundation you begin to have rooms and eventually different stories and levels all your own. You'll probably build some things (or acquire some knowledge), that suits you for a time, but after a while it will grow a little old and you'll discard it, like an old couch or wallpaper. You may build a balcony, and occasionally step out onto it, to get a good survey of what's around you. And sometimes you'll go through the hard work of tearing out a kitchen or bathroom, because life has dealt you a hard blow, and what you believed previously just no longer works. And there may even come a time in your life when you put a roof on your house, because you think your days of learning are over. But trust me, even a roof needs replacing eventually.

Someone reminded me recently, that when we talk about being disciples of Christ-which we do a lot in the church, we're really just saying that we're all learners. The Greek word for disciple is translated "a learner". Christian discipleship is a life-long learning process: we're all just trying to learn together what it means to be a follower of Christ and how to follow Christ.

This is why, Henry, Helen and Katie, our church and denomination places a high degree of importance on learning. John Calvin, the forefather of Presbyterianism, was very skeptical of religious authorities, so much so that he fought and suffered so that you can have in your pew a Bible to read and study and learn from instead of just trusting me to tell you the gospel truth. Calvin and the reformers who followed him wanted us to question what we are taught so that we can continue to grow in our understanding of God. As I learned in my confirmation class, if we never ask a question, we only learn as much as we are taught.

Calvin was also so skeptical of religious authorities that he put forth the idea of the priesthood of all believers. It was a hallmark of the Protestant Reformation. In short, the idea behind the priesthood of all believers is that all of us are called by God; all of us have a calling in life. A calling is not something special only reserved for ministers. People often make that mistake, but this is not true. All of us are called by God to do something special with our lives. We are all, as our opening hymn stated, summoned by God to follow Christ in our lives.

If you paid attention to the story from Acts that I read earlier, you may have noticed that in that story the apostles are trying to discern whom God is calling to join them; they are trying to find a replacement for Judas. And, as someone astutely observed, there are no priests, and no ministers, among the first disciples. There is no distinction between clergy or laity; just men and women called to be disciples, to get up and follow.

John Calvin probably really liked that story, because it's a fine example of the priesthood of all believers in action. But John Calvin, who you learned really loves rules and doing things decently and in order, would have shuddered at the fact that those disciples were choosing Judas' replacement by casting lots. And I'll admit that as a life-long Presbyterian, such a process of nominating people gives me the chills. Leaders should be picked decently and orderly and by committee; not by pulling a name out of a hat.

On the other hand, this story teaches us that we need to be open to the possibility that God calls us when we are least expecting it, and God calls the least suspecting people.

When you look through the Bible, you find some astonishing answers to the question of whom God calls to serve as witness and spokesperson. Consider the people God called in the Old Testament. God chose a murderer named Moses to take Israel out of Egypt. God chose a woman of a questionable reputation named Rahab to sneak Israel into the Promised Land. God chose a Moabite foreigner named Ruth to be the grandmother of Israel's greatest king. God chose a little guy named David to be that king.

God always chooses the least suspecting people to carry out God's mission. God chooses ordinary people, like you, to carry the extraordinary gospel from one generation to the next.

And that's exactly what we see happening in today's story. Justus and Mathias are ordinary people. So ordinary, in fact, that we've never heard about them until now, even though they followed the disciples and Jesus for 3 years. Given the length of time they followed Jesus, it seems to me that we would have heard something about them by now. But we haven't, not a thing. So the only thing I can surmise is that they were ordinary people, who happened to follow an extraordinary man, which led them to their calling.

At your baptisms, Katy, Henry and Helen, your parents made promises to guide and nurture you in the faith. And when they did that, your call to follow Christ began. I believe whole-heartedly that our call to follow Christ means we are called to love and to serve. We are called to love all of God's people-which doesn't mean we need to like all of God's people, but it does mean we'll treat everyone fairly; and, as a follow-up to that, we are called to *serve* all of God's people, especially the people with whom Jesus really identified: the sick, homeless, poor, the outcast and outsider, and the lonely; basically, everyone the world saw and treated as a second-class citizens. You see, at his baptism, Jesus undertook a life of service to these people and showed them in his ministry that God loved them, too. In your baptisms, Henry, Helen and Katy, God called you to reach out to others in a spirit of love and justice and mercy. Today, you are confirming that you will keep that promise.

When you do that, please know that when we embrace God's call, God's summons, we are never alone. The One who called us promises to travel with us and to never let us go.

And so, Katy, Helen and Henry, wherever you go, remember the grace of God and God's assurance that you belong to the God who created you, and that God is not simply a name, but a real being who lives within lives. And may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord be kind and gracious to you, and may the Lord look upon with favor and bring you peace today and every day.

Amen.