

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

May 19, 2013

Pentecost/Confirmation Sunday

John 15:1-11

Creed 15

Amen!

The *2013 Official Rules of Major League Baseball* is a book of 240 pages in length. Maybe you would expect it to be that long, or maybe even longer. No doubt it takes a good many rules to organize a nationwide sports league - the NFL, NBA, NHL...

But I wonder, the average baseball fan - how many of those 240 pages of rules do YOU know? To enjoy the game, you don't need to memorize the rulebook; you really just need a basic working knowledge of the game. And you can certainly LOVE the game without a super in-depth exploration of the inner workings of the rules and regulations.

I will never understand the in-field fly rule. It's been explained to me, I've looked it up, I've seen it happen in the context of a game - I still don't understand it. But the fact that I don't understand it, doesn't seem to get in the way of my enjoying the game.

Well, I think that going to church is a lot like this. You need to know a little bit about the church and its worship, the Bible and the faith - but you don't need to know everything. You need to know the basics - and that is what Confirmation is.

And so we have spent the year learning about God, the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Bible, creation, forgiveness, worship, church history and OUR church history.

We learned about the sacraments: about the meaning of Holy Communion and how Jesus is present next to us when we take it. And Baptism - that it is a rite of initiation into the church, a "sacrament of belonging" as the Jesuits put it.

We talked a lot grace - about God's love for us which transcends our every mistake; and God's love for the world, despite the hurt and pain we see in it.

I have said in a number of settings that there are 3 things you DON'T need to be confirmed:

1. an experience of the Holy Spirit (It certainly is wonderful if you have one, and some have. But it is not required.)
2. to be a good person (plenty of good people are not Christian, and we need good people who do good things, but confirmation is about something other than good deeds)
3. to have all the answers

What you DO need to be confirmed is a genuine faith in God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit - and a desire to follow Jesus. That is key, it seems to me.

The Church in its long history has hundreds of “in field fly rules” that govern its life, but you don’t need to know them all in order to be a saint in the body of Christ. *ex opere operatum, extra ecclesia nolo salus, simil justis et peccare*. Many of the “in-field fly rules” in the church, it seems, are written in Latin.

And while these are all treasured formulas to understanding the difficult twists and turns of the faith, there will be plenty of time to learn about them. And you don't need a Latin lesson this morning.

What you do need, in the faith, is to be a partner with others in this faith journey.

A friend of mine recently said, “You don’t need a PhD in systematic theology or biblical hermeneutics (that’s one of those in-field fly-rules). All you need is to be with folks whom you trust and just look over their shoulders for a while.”

I remember when I went to college, I went to the college chapel the first Sunday there, with the girls from my freshman dorm, and discovered a foreign world. I'd been raised a Congregationalist in a church similar to this; but the college I was at was Lutheran. Before arriving there, I thought all Christians were either Catholics (I grew up in Milwaukee) or Congregationalists.

Worship was weird, and they had this book which had all these pages in the front with words and music that the pastor sang and read from. And there were the hymns, and there was the bulletin. I remember that first time in worship; I was so confused. I just froze and stared; I couldn’t participate.

Well, I happened to be sitting next to Chris, who was a gentle soul, (thank God) who simply reached over to my hymnal, and flipped the pages for me and pointed to where we were supposed to be on the page. Now Chris could have ignored me, or laughed at me, but she didn’t. She was a gentle soul. And the Church needs gentle souls like that.

You don’t need a PhD in Church History to be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ. What you need is a companion in the faith, someone who will look over your shoulder and gently make corrections. And you need someone you trust who will allow you to look over their shoulder from time to time and see how they do things.

You will never know all there is about the Christian Church and its history and theological nuances.

In the final analysis, the faith boils down to the simplest of truths: God loves you more than you love yourself. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, will never leave your side and will be there even when you most doubt his presence.

Imagine with me, that you're a little kid again. And you live in a neighborhood with houses with big yards and lots of kids. And the kids from the neighborhood are outside playing all the time, usually fun, silly made up games that are different each time depending on who is there. And as they play, the rules develop in the moment.

And then one day, you see that they’re all playing outside and so you run out to join in. But you arrive late - after the game has already begun and everyone has their part, and you have no idea what they’re doing. That is no fun – and you can’t really enter in and participate until you know the rules.

You really do have to know SOMETHING about the game in order to play it. And not just to play but to enjoy it. And so this is what brings us to this moment.

The nine of you (Confirmands) have learned a little about the Church and its faith. You've learned that faith in Jesus Christ is simple if you want it to be, or joyfully complex if you want it to be. And the church will find you partners in the journey of the faith that will help you find your place in the hymnal.

Jesus says, "The branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine."

Confirmation by itself is just a seed. In order to bear fruit you need to "abide." That means you need to live along side of others who are sharing the faith with you so that you can continue to understand the faith by living it out.

You may never understand the in-field fly rules of the faith. But that should never get in the way of loving the faith and living it out in the world God has called us all to love.

While Confirmation Class is over today, your journey of faith has begun a new chapter. And to that we say with you – Amen.

Amen means, "so be it," or "truly." And typically, it's what we say at the end of things – a prayer, a hymn, the Creed. But I wonder if it's not so much an ending word as it is a beginning word.

Remember in Star Trek-the New Generation – what Captain Jean Luc Picard used to say, and it was usually the last thing he'd say... "Make it so." It was his "amen" and it made things happen.

That's how I hear the "Amen" we declare today. As a church, fifteen weeks ago, we began our journey through the Apostles' Creed with the two simple words "I believe," and we've covered a lot of territory since then.

Today our Amen puts our faith not just into action, but also into a community. Because you – we – need each other not just to believe the words, but to make them so.

You are on a blessed journey; and you've got the blessed saints of this church to send you on your way and to welcome you home.

So let's rise and declare together the faith that we don't have to understand, but that binds us together nevertheless....

Amen.