

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

June 9, 2019

Pentecost/Confirmation Sunday

John 14:23-29

You are Not Alone

Here's a little test for you:

- Can you name the last two Heisman trophy winners?
- Can you name five people who have won the Nobel or Pulitzer Prizes?
- Can you name the three wealthiest people in the world?
- How about last years' Academy Award winners for best actor/actress?

Now try this:

- Can you recall two teachers who helped your journey through school?
- Two adults, besides your parents, who helped you through difficult times?
- Someone who sat up late into the night listening to you?
- Three people who gave you good advice along the way?
- Someone who showed you what being a Christian looks like?

The people who make a difference in our lives are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money, or the most awards. They are the ones who care. And what's wonderful about the church is that our identity as children of God requires of us compassion and care for one another that is not just unique and different from what we might find elsewhere, but which has a lasting and lifelong impact.

And lifelong not just because we're so awesome we have that kind of impact or influence; but lifelong because the Christian life is never something we fully and finally accomplish. That's why when you make your confirmation vows, your answers all include "with the help of God."

The faith that you are professing today is a gift; it is hardly something WE DO. As promised, God sent His Holy Spirit, here called the Paraclete - not a word we would know - but which means *the one called alongside*.

And in this way, the Holy Spirit is what keeps our faith alive - breathing - remember the Greek word in the Bible for Spirit is *pneuma*, which means breath / air. And to state the obvious, the air we breathe comes from outside of us. We don't create the air we breathe.

The point is this, the gift of the Holy Spirit and Confirmation remind us that we cannot believe on our own. Faith is God's work in us, not our work for Him. Martin Luther, when explaining the third section of the Apostles' Creed, said this:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I CANNOT believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, except that the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith.

It really is a miracle that the first followers of Jesus believed in him after his death and resurrection. For those who want evidence that God is real, that Jesus was God, that the Holy Spirit is still at work... the evidence is right before your eyes. That the church exists to this day...Sharing Christ and Changing Lives...is evidence itself!

Many of those who have grown up in religious traditions eventually leave because they find it too confining. Not so for Nicholas Wolterstorff (an author I like). He says,

[In joining the church,] I became a member of a community, spread across time and space, whose ways of thinking and acting have, over the years, grounded, nurtured, instructed, guided, and [shaped] me. [The church for me is about] living gratefully, joyfully, and responsibly in this world.

From time-to-time I will make the typo “conformation.” And I think it is not wrong to think of confirmation as conformation. Because by professing belief in the Christian faith and formally joining with the church, you are conforming your lives to Christ as you are being shaped by the community of believers here. You are saying that you stand under the authority of the God who made you and loves you beyond measure and who calls you to be different.

And, in this way, you are claimed as His and given a new identity.

In the late 80’s I was the Youth Director at Trinity Lutheran Church in Vancouver, Washington. The church owned a couple of vans, which we often used when we went places as a youth group (retreats, mission trips, around town even). Well, the vans had painted on the side of them: *Trinity Lutheran Church, Vancouver, Washington*; and every time we were about to load up and drive away, I would have to have a reminder conversation with them about their behavior in the van. (These were the days before tinted windows were a thing.)

And every time the conversation went something like this:

Who are we? Trinity Lutheran Church!

And how do we act? With respect and dignity and kindness.

Remember it’s painted right there on the side of the van for all to see.

And we had to have this conversation EVERY time, because we’d need reminding every time, because living our faith takes practice.

A pastor in Iowa says this about that:

Participants in new member classes at our church complete a personal information form at the end of the session. A box on the form prompts them to write down different “causes, passions, and commitments” that figure in their lives. Everything from tagging monarch butterflies to helping kids with disabilities learn to swim has shown up in that space. Last spring, a class participant wrote only four words in the box: “Trying to be faithful.”

I pondered those words late into the night. Was this woman embarrassed by a series of missteps in her life? Might there be an addiction? Since her husband wasn’t with her, was her marriage in trouble?

As I’ve gotten to know her, what she meant has become clear. Marla isn’t interested in nominal Christianity with a thin religious veneer covering the rest of her life. She doesn’t want to see how little she can do in life and still be considered a Christian. Marla knows the Christian life takes practice.

Living a life aligned with Jesus is hard. We practice and practice, trying to get even a few of the basics right. It’s mostly unglamorous work, as unglamorous as brushing your teeth at the beginning and end of the day, or playing endless scales and arpeggios while learning the piano.

I’m thoroughly convinced, however, that nothing resembling expertise exists in the Christian life. How can you become an expert at receiving the totally undeserved mercy of God on a daily basis? What difference would brilliance make for allowing your heart to break more often for people who suffer? Exactly what kind of mastery would be necessary to live consistently in un-self-serving ways?

There’s a reason we speak meaningfully of practicing the faith. It’s all practice.

Maya Angelou said:

I'm working at trying to be a Christian and that's serious business. It's not something where you think, 'Oh, I've got it done. I did it all day—hot diggity.' The truth is, all day long you try to do it, try to be it. And then in the evening, if you're honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, 'Hmmm. I only blew it 86 times. Not bad.' I'm trying to be a Christian.

And Martin Luther wrote very simply about this:

*This life is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness;
is not health, but healing;
not being, but becoming;
not rest, but exercise;
we are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it;
the process is not yet finished, but it is going on;
this is not the end, but it is the road.*

In a culture that prizes results, it's not surprising that we celebrate speed and proficiency. Maya Angelou again: *I'm always amazed . . . when [people] say, 'I'm a Christian.' I always think, 'Already? You've already got it? My goodness, you're fast.'*

(Peter W. Marty, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Davenport, Iowa; *The Christian Century*, October 17, 2018)

You may have been born into a Christian family, and been baptized in the church. But you are becoming Christians as a community, guided by the Holy Spirit who is by your side. You are NOT alone! Not here, not anywhere. In the darkest, most frightening and loneliest moments - You are not alone! Though your future is uncertain - You are not alone!

You have one who is called alongside you - the Holy Spirit - as you make your way from here. As you say "Yes" to God and to the church, you are also not just affirming, but declaring that you are in the van - *Union Congregational Church, Groton, Massachusetts* painted on the side - heading down the road of life together, with Jesus at the wheel.

And with Jesus at the wheel, you are guaranteed that the journey will be blessed. Blessed indeed.

Amen.