

Hearing God's Word Proclaimed

What is a Christian?

Rev. Kathryn Kibbie Laird

Confirmation Sunday

May 17, 2020

1 Timothy 4:12-16 *Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.* ¹³ *Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.* ¹⁴ *Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.* ¹⁵ *Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.* ¹⁶ *Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*

John 14: 15-21 ¹⁵ *"If you love me, keep my commands.* ¹⁶ *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—* ¹⁷ *the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be^[a] in you.* ¹⁸ *I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.* ¹⁹ *Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.* ²⁰ *On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.* ²¹ *Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them."* *Holy Wisdom, holy Word. Thanks be to God.*

Let us pray. Holy and Gracious God, speak to us in our place of deepest need. We live in a time of uncertainty and anxiety, suspended between our increasing restlessness to get back to our lives, to reconnect with friends and the fear that Covid 19 is still lurking out there, a very real and present threat. God, be our calm in the storm, our light in the darkness. This morning I ask that you might pour through me the gift of preaching that these words might inspire us to live the way you would have us live. And we know that you will for we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the Risen and Reigning Lord. Amen.

When I tell people my favorite age to work with is adolescents, they generally think something is wrong with me. Who would admit to such a thing? Not publicly anyway. However, I cannot think of a more deserving age group. For twenty years, I have spent my Sunday evenings ordering pizza and going to youth group. Middle schoolers are like hummingbirds. To work with them, you have to be nimble because they hop from subject to subject, with very little transition between topics. And when there are no words, they become painfully self-conscious. High schoolers have their own biorhythm. Do you remember the Fonz from Happy Days? He was chill and relaxed. Senior highs often chillax. That's chill and relax.

The dictionary describes adolescents as the period of time between being a child to becoming an adult, ages 12-21. Early adolescence is middle school or purgatory if you will. You are not exactly in hell, but you are clearly not in heaven either. Middle adolescence is high school where you get

a glimpse of heaven, but you also realize your parents are not perfect. And late adolescence or college is a time of being on your own before flying the nest. So what does that make it for those of you who are home from college and have had to move back in with your parents again under quarantine—heaven? Hell? Purgatory? Probably depends on the day and who you ask.

I have always thought of my job as the person who tries to create the Kingdom of God for children and youth. To show them a taste for how life is supposed to be. So that they feel perfectly safe, relaxed, and accepted. No masks. No judgment. While I have very few rules in youth group about basketballs flying through the air or how loud the kids play their music, I do have certain rules that I insist upon. No put downs ever. Everyone is included always. We are a family. Everyone is valued, cherished, loved. Where did this come from?

Believe it or not, I remember feeling awkward in middle school. And in high school I remember the extraordinary pressure I put on myself to compete at sports and make high honors.

No one showed me the Kingdom of God. No one invited me to be at peace with where I was in life. No one quoted Romans 8 to me and said nothing could separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus—not friends who came and went, not a bad grade which I thought would be the end of me, not anything I could dream up in terms of rebellion (and I was the least rebellious person you probably knew. You probably would not have even liked me back then.) I needed to hear it. But it was sorely missing from my spiritual life. And so I have set out to create that space through youth ministry everywhere I have served. At First Pres we love to serve, to be together, to value one another and the friendships we share. I am most proud to say that our church is an extended family for our kids. I know many of you think our kids are too comfortable in church, knowing exactly where the snacks are in the kitchen and helping themselves, and plopping down on the Yogibo's in the Tate youth barn like they are at home). *They are at home. That is the point.*

When I think of this year's confirmation class, and what I want to say to them, I want to begin with the passage from 1 Timothy 4:12 *Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for other believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.* Yes, you are young, but you have a lot to teach us. I want to share with you a few sentences from our confirmands which they wrote in their faith statements.

- Pryor Gilbert's unresolved question is How do we become saints? Just so you know, I remember asking my home minister the same question when I graduated from high school. Pryor also said her favorite bible passage is Noah's Ark because it shows us that God is with us no matter how hard times get.
- Emily Rodgers said I know I will be welcomed to heaven because of the Easter story. It tells us we will have eternal life. We do not earn our way into heaven, we go to heaven by God's grace and love for us. Emily also talked about her favorite part of confirmation was the monthly exchanges we had with Special Church. Every month we baked cookies, carved pumpkins, or made snow globes for our secret pals at Special Church, and it was the highlight of the month.
- Carter Lightburn asked whether Hell exists and if it does, what is it for? Carter's favorite bible passage is David and Goliath because it teaches us that even if you are very small and

are facing a very big problem, God is always with you, and you can defeat things no matter what the odds are against you.

- Isabella Madrid said prayer is important to her because it is her open conversation with God. She says she prays before she goes on stage for dance or any time she is afraid and anxious, and it is immediately comforting to remember that God is always with us. Her favorite bible passage is in the Easter story where Jesus washes the disciples' feet. This simple act teaches us humility. We are all equal and we need to show appreciation and gratitude for the people in our lives.
- Brooks Wunderlich says that he does not like to memorize prayers per se. Rather he likes to look ahead at the day with God and talk about it, and then at the end of the day look back and see what might have gone better. He says, I know I am just learning to pray but I want God to know who I really am. Brooks' favorite bible passage is Adam and Eve. He says this one passage teaches us that we need to forgive. Forgiveness is so very important in life.
- Doster Crowell says God is love. God's love is universal, faithful, and eternal. God loves us no matter the circumstances. No matter what. Jesus is the Son of God who lived 2000 years ago. He was born in Bethlehem in a manger, and though poor, he became a rabbi and a teacher. Because he was God in human form, he taught us how to live. Jesus was love in human form. Jesus set the example for us to follow.
- And finally Nel Peter who responded to the question what unresolved questions do you have after confirmation by saying. I still have lots and lots of questions. Is heaven a physical place? Where is it exactly? How do God the Father and God the Holy Spirit exist simultaneously? If God gave us free will, what kind of things does God have control over? Scientifically how did God the Father become Jesus? And this is just the beginning. I have many more questions, so many more questions.

To all our confirmands, thank you for asking so many questions. You have been a joy to teach, and from the beginning this class has bonded together beautifully. Scott Beyer and I had so much fun teaching you.

The question I want to focus on today is what is a Christian? Writer Frederick Buechner says in his book *Beyond Words*, "Some think of a Christian as one who necessarily *believes* certain things. That Jesus was the Son of God, say. Or that Mary was a virgin....Some think of a Christian as one who necessarily *does* certain things. Such as going to church. Or getting baptized. And some think of a Christian as just being a nice guy."

When Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life no one comes to the Father except through me" he didn't say you have to believe in a particular doctrine. Rather Jesus invited us to live and participate in and get caught up in the way of life that he embodied. Namely to embody love.

Christians come in all forms and sizes. Some are beginning their journey, and some are very far along the path. If you remember just one idea from confirmation in twenty years' time may it be this—Christianity is about embodying love. It is the way of Jesus Christ. It is the example Christ set for us. Embody love. So any time you stand at the crossroads and are given the choice between hurting someone and helping someone, between grabbing for yourself or sharing with someone in

need, between including or excluding, between being right or being kind. Come to a full stop. Prayerfully ask yourself, which of these paths embody love?

All of my adult life I have worked to inspire the minds that will one day lead and inspire the world. Why do I do it? Because it is awesome beyond words. Like you, I want to mold and shape our youth to be life-long Christians. And the best way to do that is for all of us to show them the way. To embody love as best we can until that day when we meet Jesus himself and see Love in its truest form.

Dear Confirmation Class of 2020, this is not the end but the gateway to your spiritual journey. Wherever you go, may you embody love. May you show love to others, and may others show love to you. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.