

Confirmation Sunday
Rev. Peter Foss
June 11, 2006

Let me begin by making it clear that today is not “graduation day.” I have made that mistake before and have decided not to further multiply my own error. Let me put this into a bit of context.

Last week a woman I have known since 1973 visited our house for a day and a half. I met her the year after she was confirmed in her church. She was then 16 and entering the 10th grade. She is now 48. We are both much older! I asked what she remembered of her confirmation some 33 years ago. The first thing out of her mouth: “I remember the dress I wore that day.” You might laugh at that, thinking it an odd and frivolous reply. Yet the dress did indicate her confirmation was an important occasion. Sometimes what you wear is indicative of how important an event happens to be! But after some thought she said, “Well, (and she does have an almost photographic memory) “I do remember Al,” who was the minister, “saying that while this was the end to our Sunday School experience, it was also a beginning.” “Alas!” I thought to myself, “Confirmation as graduation!” You leave church school behind. You start out on a new phase.

I have said similar things over the years on Confirmation Sundays. Not only older, I am perhaps wiser now. So again, let me make it clear. Today should not be viewed (I don’t think) as a graduation day. Not that it isn’t important or worth celebrating. There is a real significance to what is happening this morning – the act of affirming your faith, family gathered together, the delight of church members, gift giving – all of that and more. I have no trouble thinking of today as another marker along way. A marker that finds its approval in the congratulations of the gathered faith community. One that challenges all of us to continue the marathon of faith. But not a graduation! Never an ending!

So I will avoid the platitudes that are so common at graduations. Advice such as “Take the time to smell the roses” and “Reach for the stars.” Sentiment such as “remember, those were the best years of your life.” Humor: “Today you are one step closer to a job and the real world.” Or is that a threat?

You see, I have trouble viewing our faith relationship to God as anything other than a lifelong journey. In fact, we are living out a marathon...that began one day when we entered church and never really ends. When I hear the reading from Isaiah I think of the endurance it takes to run a lifelong race and God’s companionship along the way.

Even youth will faint and be weary.
the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. Isaiah 40: 30-31

In faith, there is no end time. No ceremony of graduating into a time when the work and the study are over. It’s ongoing and only the constant companionship of our God will keep us strong and grant us courage. We can never afford to think of faith in terms of “having reached the goal.” Rather we must view things as a straight and winding road beneath our feet; a road of detours and slippery ledges; a road marked by success as well as failure; a road that may lead us places we never would have guessed and to destinations where, only by God’s grace and through Christ’s love, do we even dare to go. On this lengthy journey, we learn to wait for the Lord to renew us, that we might mount up with wings like eagles and soar where others might dare not go.

So if today is not a graduation, what are we doing? Why are we so happy? Well, clearly it seems to me, because you (the Confirmands) are stating publicly that this is the road you want to be on. That love (God's love in particular) has an appeal to you. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) Those words or similar ones have led you here this morning to declare in the midst of this gathered community that you want to know more about love and how to use its power to change the world. To change the violence and hatred that are so common in our society into harmony and peace. To discover for yourself the fulfillment of love. And to affirm that from the day you were born this is what your journey has been training you to do – to teach peace; God's peace!

Today is indeed an important day of acknowledgment and affirmation. God's love has brought you here and you, desiring to know more and do more, want to belong to this very special church that bears Jesus' name. Therefore, today is a celebration of continued commitment on your part. It's not an end...or a beginning, but the simple acknowledgement on your part that you wish to proceed, as you have been doing, but perhaps now with even greater energy and determination. All of you were baptized or christened. Your parents either brought you to the font or encouraged you in that undertaking. Today is perhaps, for some of you, the first day in which you have expressed this calling for yourself. To learn more about the nature of God. To serve. To share your faith with others. To venture forth in love. This is what makes it so ultimately powerful – that it is a statement on your part of your faith in Jesus!

We are here to say that we applaud you. We celebrate your testimony of faith. And we promise to stand with you as others who answer God's call. Which means that we need to find ways for you to use your gifts in our faith community. To encourage you to attend church camp as many of you already do, as well as other NH Conference events. Making sure there is an active youth program off the ground this coming fall in this church. Getting you involved in service projects – with Habitat or Heifer, the Food Pantry or Hurricane Relief. Sharing with you the joy we feel during worship; and confessing that you may have forms of worship that you want to impart and teach to us. Knowing and addressing you by name, because we are in the same local faith community. Most importantly, we want you to know that we walk together on this journey of faith. Perhaps we no longer hold your hand and lead you into the building; we walk now side by side to learn from one another.

So, we ask for God's blessing on this special day. I love to read the words of Bob Dylan. His song "Forever Young" is excellent. But it's a graduation speech filled with all those platitudes. "May your hands always be busy; May your feet always be swift; May you have a strong foundation when the winds of changes shift." Good stuff! Important stuff. I hope you hear the song often and listen carefully to the words. But it lays so much of the burden on you and I want you to know, that above all, you are not alone. We are with you in covenant as the Church of Jesus. So this year a different song...the song entitled "Joy" - the words written by Janis Ian, like Dylan also a great folksinger. She writes a prayer of support and encouragement:

I hope the wind is at your back keeping you on track
That you never lack for love
I hope you walk beside your heart even in the dark
guided by the stars above
I wish you love.

So wherever you may roam
out there on your own
home is just a heart away
I wish you joy.

We are never alone on the journey; we constantly pray for one another and show support as we seek greater justice and healing for our world. We wish you love; we wish you great joy...in faith. This, your church home, is just a heart away. Through Jesus our Christ.