

THE COMMITTED LIFE

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

(Philippians 4:4-9, NRSV)

Dear Anastasia, C.J., Chris, Doug, Gabrielle, Isabelle, Katharine, Luke, Matt, Morgan, and Zoie,

I write this Epistle of Jimmy to offer my congratulations on your Confirmation. We've come a long way together since beginning our Confirmation journey back in September and now it's time to celebrate. I'm fully aware that none of you will miss showing up at 8:45 on Sunday mornings for class. And while Chase and I would never have made it to class without being caffeinated, we will miss our weekly gatherings. We loved hearing your fresh impressions of the Bible stories and theology. You were a fun class who knew when to laugh and when to be serious.

One thing I hope you learned this year, if you didn't know it before now, is that you are important to Chase and me. We truly love each and every one of you. We hope you will always feel comfortable giving us a call or dropping by our offices to tell us what's going on in your life, to share a funny story, or to talk about something that worries you. Wherever you go and whatever you do, always know that we will be your ministers and your friends.

This day is a milestone for you. All of us have milestone moments in our lives—our first day of school, the day we get our driver's license, our Senior Prom, our wedding day. In the same manner, our lives are marked by religious milestones—the day we're baptized, our first day of Sunday School, the day we receive our Bibles on Christian Education Sunday, our first PF mission trip. Today ranks as another such milestone—Confirmation Sunday.

I offer you my most heart-felt congratulations on making the decision to be Confirmed, for Confirmation at its best is more than an 8 month class with homework, a retreat, and a concluding worship service. While all of the outward trappings play an important role in Confirmation, it's the inward faith that matters most. The purpose of Confirmation is not to add more names to our membership roles. Rather, the purpose is to educate your minds and nurture your hearts in the Christian faith that you might make a lasting commitment to God as revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. In other words, Confirmation is about encouraging you to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. After reading your papers and speaking individually with you, I feel that together we've made great progress in what will be your lifelong faith journey.

Rev. William Sloane Coffin said, “Socrates was mistaken: It’s not the unexamined life that is not worth living; it’s the uncommitted life.”

I am so proud of you for committing your lives to following God’s way of love. Someone has said that if you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything. By committing your lives to God, you are standing for that which matters most in life—loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself.

Your Confirmation papers beautifully reflect your commitment to the Christian life. Isabelle Salvaterra wrote, “The reason I am getting confirmed is because I want to help others the way God does and Jesus did. The reason I want to follow him is because Jesus can teach us many things about life, he can guide us through sorrow and despair and bring happiness to our lives.” Katharine Pecorino said, “Through the course of my life, following Jesus will complete me as a well-rounded, kind, human being.” Doug Horowitz wrote, “God’s presence can be seen inside of each and every person, and Jesus’ spirit lives within those who believe in him.” Reflecting on Jesus, Chris Manoogian said “I think that Jesus is great [because] he accepts all types of people; whether they are American, European, Indian, Asian, Black, White, Male, Female, Gay or Straight, they are accepted for who they are. You don’t have to act a special way to impress Jesus, as long as you are kind and helpful to people, you are considered a great person.”

I am so pleased that many of you believe our church reflects Christ’s spirit of inclusivity and that we are here for everyone. C.J. Quackenbush wrote, “One reason why I want to be a part of this church is because [it] opens up its arms for people. It lets all different kinds of people be a part of the church regardless of their backgrounds...In some churches the priest is the most powerful person in the

church...This church looks at all people as equals. No person is better than another...This church is its own little community and this community looks at all people as equals.”

Luke Record likes the freedom he finds in our church. He said: “I have learned that belonging to this church is not all about strict rules, and requirements. It is mainly focused on faith...In this church, there aren’t many set theories that have to be believed without questioning. Beliefs are up for debate, and part of our church is to welcome and accept various thoughts. It is okay to disagree on topics. God won’t punish you for being upset and frustrated. As long as you keep your trust in him, he will be there to help you through it. I believe faith can carry you over any obstacle that you experience.” Chris Manoogian is glad for the grace found in our church. He wrote, “In this church you are encouraged to be who you really are. You are accepted even if you have committed a few minor sins, like not doing your Confirmation Class homework.”

Some of you reflected on the importance that church has played in the life of your family. Zoie Williams remembers the first time she realized that church is a sacred place. She said, “My first memory of being in church was [for] my Aunt Susan’s wedding. I was three-years-old at the time and didn’t know much about what was going on, but I knew I was in a place of worship.” Some students reflected on their families’ roots in this church. Morgan McLaughlin wrote, “This church was very important to my grandparents, Frank and Libby Payne. It is also important to my mother, Holly, my sister Devon, my Aunt Penny...and to my Dad.” And some students recalled how the church proved helpful in difficult times. Anastasia Williams said, “This church and Jesus Christ helped my family through tough times, and now it is time for me to help them by becoming a member.”

I am proud that you have committed your lives to God's goal of making the world a better place. Isabelle Salvaterra wrote, "Jesus...helped others in need, and he was nice to all people and respected them, even if they were [from] the lowest rank of society. Jesus healed people; he brought them light through darkness and brightened their days even more." Some of you believe that helping others gives your life an important purpose. Gabrielle Salvaterra said, "God gives me a purpose in life and guides me to be kind and help others. This is ...why I want to be a follower of Jesus Christ. I like to help others, even if it is just making their day better...Every time I help others, I feel that I am fulfilling a purpose that God has made for my life." Others of you remembered specific ways our church has helped others in recent years. Matt Manoogian wrote, "I have witnessed...our church help people in need. Whether it was money and supplies for Katrina victims, food for the hungry or even a warm coat for a needy child, we always want to help. And this is God's work. I believe that the goodness of people will always win over evil." Matt's insights give me chills. We do indeed strive to do God's work and in so doing have faith that good will ultimately win over evil.

As I read your profound words I am reminded of the Apostle Paul's words, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:8-9).

My prayer is that wherever life takes you, you will stay committed to that which is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable to God—that you might know God's peace and presence all your days on this earth. My

dear friends Confirmation class is over, but your faith journey has just begun.

Grace and Peace,
Jimmy

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only
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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, through your Son, Jesus Christ, you call us all to become followers of your way. And yet we are not capable of following you alone. We need your help to become the people you would have us be. On this Confirmation Sunday challenge us to rededicate our lives to the teachings and example of Jesus, that we might be faithful disciples. Today we celebrate the decision that Anastasia, C.J., Chris, Doug, Gabrielle, Isabelle, Katharine, Luke, Matt, Morgan, and Zoie have made. “Increase in them [and in us] the gifts of your Holy Spirit...love for others, joy in [service], peace in disagreement, patience in suffering, kindness toward all people, goodness in evil times, faithfulness in temptation, and gentleness in the face of opposition” (*U.C.C. Book of Worship*, p. 151). Strengthen us all for the tasks you have given.

Thank you, O God, for people like our Confirmands who are willing to commit their lives to you and your cause. Through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.