

PASSING THE BATON

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Hebrews 12:1-3 NRSV

Dear Dana, Ned, Adam, Kristen, Katie and Jake,

Since this is my first Confirmation Sunday sermon, I decided to take a page from Jimmy's playbook and write you an epistle (which you will recall from class is a fancy word for letter—you remember that right? Wait, don't answer that.)

First of all, let me say how proud I am of you all, and on behalf of the church, let me say how proud all of us are of you. You have made an important decision—the most important decision—to declare publicly that your choice is to be followers of Jesus Christ and members of this church. Earlier in your lives, promises were made on your behalf by your families and various communities of faith to raise you in the Christian religion. For many of you it was really early and as small children you had no idea what the fuss was all about. You were blessed with water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that blessing has stood over you until the time you could make up your own minds about your faith and *confirm* your baptism. That time is now, and not only do we rejoice at your decisions but angels in heaven rejoice as well.

It has been wonderful getting to know each of you at a deeper level over the last year in confirmation class. Sure, most Sunday mornings there were bleary eyes and complaints about the class being so early on Sundays, one of the few days you could sleep in. Sure, some of you had the tendency to pick up a pack of diapers stored in the classroom and hold an impromptu touch football game. Others of you had the habit of locking the ministers out of the classroom (that is, until you realized Jimmy and I have a key to the door). And even one of you had the charming habit of revising the attendance sheet by adding the word “smells” after the names of classmates, so the roll then read “so and so smells.” Yet, even with the complaints and the high jinks, we had fun together, shared laughter and most importantly discussed important questions of faith.

I can testify to the fact that each of you has taken the confirmation process seriously and had a lot of fun along the way. You have been thoughtful in your questions and on many occasions showed spiritual depth beyond your years. The papers you have written are expressions of your faith, and like all such attempts to express a person's beliefs about God, they don't say everything that is in your heart. No paper could ever say all that. In some ways, you will continue to write out your faith throughout your lives through the love you show to God and to others. Every time God's love works through you to touch another's life, you will write a new line. As you grow as individuals and grow in your

faith, things will change, but I hope that the earnest desire expressed in your papers to be disciples of Jesus Christ will always remain.

There are a number of things contained in your papers that I feel are worth noting and responding to.

Ned, in addition to being perhaps the only confirmand in the history of this church or any other to reference the assassination of William McKinley, you also made another powerful statement. You wrote, **“The most important part of going through the confirmation process is that I got to make the final decision. Yes, there were Chase and Jimmy teaching the class and telling us about the Bible, there were my relatives and family telling me stories about their faith, but in the end, I got to find my faith by myself. It’s Mine!”** Similarly, Katie, you wrote about our church, **“They are also very lenient about the ‘rules’ about believing in God compared to many other churches. I don’t think there should be strict guidelines on how to believe in God, I think that it would be defeating the purpose. If someone tells you exactly what to do and how to believe in God, I think that your faith cannot be true because you are not making the decision to believe on your own.”** What great words!

I believe that all six of you have made this decision on your own, and I’m glad, because, as we have tried to stress all year long, this is *your* decision. Sure, there are expectations from family and perhaps even a little peer pressure as friends get confirmed at other churches or have bar-and bat mitzvahs, but ultimately this is not about anyone else but you and God. The fact that we leave it up to you to decide and leave it up to you to find words to express your faith means we trust you. We believe that you have it inside of you to make this choice and I’m glad you have taken that responsibility on.

Also, Ned, you described faith as **“the strength to take the chances life presents to you”** and as a **“jump”** when you do not know for sure where you will land. Katie, you mentioned that confirmation helped you realize that having **“unanswered questions and doubt”** is okay, and that faith is about **“putting yourself out there with only your trust in God.”** Faith is a blind jump into the dark even when you don’t know where you will land and when things don’t totally add up. God wants our trust, because if we had 100% proof, then it would not be faith after all. Following Christ is risky and sometimes difficult, but I hope you have learned to never be afraid to ask questions or express doubts. Faith involves having those questions and doubts but trusting God anyway. Even Jesus had them in Gethsemane and on the cross, so it surely is alright for us to have them too.

Jake, you mentioned that one of your reasons for following Jesus is that Jesus forgave others; he even forgave the ones who were killing him as he was dying on the cross. You wrote, **“I think that the world would be a better place if more people were as forgiving as Jesus, and as I am confirmed today, I will try to be more forgiving of others.”** Wow! What more can we ask? Forgiveness is at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The forgiveness that Jesus modeled does not add up to, as the old saying goes, “forgive and forget.” Jesus did not forget what was done to him. Instead, he faced

squarely the harm done to him, acknowledged it for the awful thing it was, and then still chose to forgive the ones doing him harm. Jesus, says to each of us, “I know who you are and what you have done, but I choose to love you anyway.” Likewise, we are commanded to do the same. When I think of our world and its endless violent clashes, often done in the name of religion, I can only pray that more people will learn the lesson you have learned. Today, as everyone from politicians to TV preachers to people in the pews use the name of Jesus to condemn others, I pray that the six of you will demonstrate a different understanding of Christ—one of compassion, mercy and grace.

Dana, you wrote in your paper that one of the reasons you want to be a member of our church is that we are **“extremely accepting”** and **“we welcome all people.”** Katie, you wrote a similar thing in your paper as well, **“Jesus would have accepted anyone as his follower despite their race, nationality, or any other unimportant qualities that make a person who they are.”** Dana and Katie, by writing about the theme of acceptance, you have touched on the real meat of Jesus’ message. This is where the rubber of faith meets the road of reality. Sometimes it is hard to overcome our own prejudices, presuppositions and petty differences and to simply accept each other as Christ commanded us. It is what we are trying to do as a church and what our denomination is trying to do when we broadcast the words “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” I am saddened that for so many people in our culture the church is a place where they feel rejected and condemned. I know Jesus grieves for these people too. I hope that the hearts of each of you will always break wide open to make room for any and all who come to church looking for a place to belong.

Kristen, you wrote something so beautifully honest in your paper that I want you to feel commended for it. You wrote, **“Sometimes it’s hard to put in words why I want to be a follower of Jesus Christ or why I want to be part of the church. Its hard to say because sometimes I just know it’s right.”** In the end, that is why each one of us who claims the title Christian does so. When all the arguments and rationales are given, it really does all come down to the feeling deep in your soul that this is right. It is something that we cannot express in human words. It is a longing inside of us for the one who created us, the one that knows us best. **“I just know it’s right”** is in many ways all we need to say. It is what the six of you are saying this morning.

Kristen, you also mentioned that you actually have fun at church and that people laugh here at church. No higher praise could you have given this church. Laughter and fun are ingredients missing from so many people’s religion. It’s as if when they walk in the church doors, they left their sense of humor out in the car. As a class, we have laughed together a lot this year—thanks to a lot help in that department from Jake. May we keep on laughing together, and may the six of you always bring your wonderful smiles, laughter and senses of humor with you to church. I believe Jesus laughed a lot and that he laughs with us still.

Adam, you wrote in your paper that after seeing your grandfather, **“I knew for sure that I wanted to be a follower of Jesus Christ.”** What a powerful testimony to your

grandfather and what an example to set before us of the type of person God calls us to be. How amazing would it be if we allowed Christ into our lives to such an extent that when people encountered us they would be drawn to Christ. I did not hear you say that your grandfather preached at you or convinced you to become a Christian with some intellectual arguments or twisted your arm. Instead, your grandfather was authentically himself, the person God created him to be, and Jesus shined through him to impact your life. I hope that many people will say the same about each of you as you encounter them throughout your lives.

Katie, you also mentioned your grandmother as an example of faith. Ned, you mentioned the faith of your family and relatives. Throughout the year, each of you reflected on the influence of your families upon your faith. You are right, and I know today that your families are very proud of you. They deserve credit for helping you come to this place at this time. Dana, you described being a Christian as **“having a family that always welcomes you no matter what.”** That image of family is used throughout the Bible as a metaphor for the people of God. Not only are each of us the product of our family by blood and adoption, but we are also the product of our church family. This church claimed you as family before today, but on this Sunday, each of you officially claims us as family in return. We are bound together by the Spirit of God.

Furthermore, our family of faith extends well beyond the walls of this church to include the entire community of believers throughout the world. It even extends backwards in time to all of the Christians who have ever lived and to the rich history of the people of Israel. The scripture passage read a few moments ago from the letter to the Hebrews describes all these people from all these different generations that stretch back to Abraham as a “great cloud of witnesses.” Today, you are not just surrounded by your individual families and your church family but also by all the ancestors of faith that have worked to keep the message of God’s love alive.

The passage goes on to describe this passing on of the faith as a race. It’s like a big relay race from generation to generation. Today that baton is passed to you. For now, we are here with you as you leave the starting line, but there will come a day when it will be your turn to pass on to the next generation—your children and the children of others you love—what has been given to you. May you run well the race set before you.

May you continue to make your faith your own.

May you trust God in the face of fear.

May you forgive others who hurt you.

May you listen to the voice of the Spirit inside of you that speaks what no words can express.

May you laugh with Jesus.

May you cherish the families that nurtured your faith.

May you welcome others into God’s ever-expanding family of love.

Grace and Peace,

Your friend, Chase

Rev. Chase Peeples

The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

The First Sunday After Pentecost, May 22, 2005

PASTORAL PRAYER

Creator, Eternal Spirit, Christ, we worship you today and thank you for our confirmands. We praise you because these amazing young people have made the choice to be followers of Jesus Christ. We are honored as a church that they have chosen to join us as a family of faith. Bless them. Keep them. Guide them. Protect them. May they always be people who demonstrate your love and grace to a hurting world. Amen.