

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on June 5, 2022

FAITH THROUGH COMMUNITY

Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Matthew 18:20

Today is Pentecost Sunday. On this Sunday we celebrate the birthday of the Christian Church. We remember the core story that comes after Jesus' Ascension. We recall that the disciples were gathered in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit came upon them. This has come to be recognized as the beginnings of the Church.

The tradition at Clarence Presbyterian Church is to confirm our young people on the first Sunday in June. I am always glad when Pentecost falls on the first Sunday in June, because it is most appropriate to receive young people into full membership on the day we recall the birth of Christ's Church. Today nine young men and women will stand before us and affirm their faith in Christ and become full members in that community that was founded in the upper room two thousand years ago.

Their parents answered the faith questions at baptism. Today at confirmation, they will for themselves. They publicly commit themselves to Christ and his Church. This is not always easy for Presbyterians. One of our confirmands speaks for many – **At first, writing this was difficult, because I don't normally talk about my faith and my interactions with the church.**

How true are her words for many of us. Faith, for most of us, is largely an intensely private concern. Yet to confirm our faith means making a public affirmation of our commitment to Christ and his church. As another student wrote: **One reason I would like to be part of the church is to affirm my faith in God on a higher level.**

I remind you again that years ago, at their baptism, their parents stood and made promises on their behalf, today they confirm those promises for themselves. This morning we focus on how the church helps to prepare young people to pledge their lives to Christ.

It has been the task of this congregation to nurture these young people to prepare them for this moment. We do this in many ways.

First the Church is called to be a teacher of truth. Think of the experiences of Jesus' disciples on Easter and the days following. There had been reports from Peter and John that the tomb was empty. Then Mary Magdalene came saying that she had seen the Lord. She was actually saying that she had seen Jesus. They knew that he had been killed on the cross, how could she be saying he is alive.

So they gathered in the Upper Room to think, to ponder and to reflect. All of the events in the last days had transpired so quickly. They had been with their leader Jesus in

the countryside. Then they came to Jerusalem and events got out of control. It was all over so quickly. What did it all mean?

So these followers of Jesus gathered together to talk over these events. They must have wondered about Mary. She had loved Jesus so much. She had been so emotional over his death. Her grief was so deep, could her experience of seeing Jesus alive have been only wish fulfillment. Yet Peter and John had reported the tomb was empty. What was the truth? The followers of Jesus came together to discover the truth.

In the same manner, you and I need others to help us understand our experience of God. We cannot fully understand God on our own. We need the Church to help us understand and interpret our experience. One isolated experience that we might have cannot be trusted. It must be understood in the context of God's interaction with his people through the years.

The teaching office of the Church stands as a source of wisdom and experience. In the Church we share our experience of God with all those past and present. It is only in community that we gain true wisdom of God.

It has been within this Christian Community that our confirmands have learned about God. They have been a part of Sunday school and worship in this congregation. Cory, Eva, Natalie, Jeremy, Samantha, Ryan, Brie, Charlie and Caroline learned the stories of the Bible from many of you sitting here today. They know that the Church is the place they can continue to learn. As one of our young people wrote: **I can learn important lessons and relate experiences that are happening to me through the teachings of the Bible.**

A second way that our young people learn about God is through mentors and the examples we see in the lives of others.

Part of our confirmation process includes working with a sponsor/mentor. One student wrote: **Confirmation allowed me to connect to my mentor. I have known her since my family and I joined the church. Through confirmation, I found out why she joined the church and learned about her confirmation journey. As a result of talking with her, and the classes at church, I learned that joining church will help me have a "real" experience of faith. I can feel like I really belong to God, with the help and guidance from the church.**

Another of our students wrote: **There have been many people in the church who have helped me to grow and shaped me as a person. Mr. Owen acted as a great role model for me and taught me what service is all about. He did not do this through talking to me, rather I learned by witnessing his acts of generosity. He may not be aware that I was watching, but I was. It is my belief that becoming a member of this church will help me to act as a role model for others to come. One of my desires is to take an active role in the food pantry. This will allow me to follow in Mr. Owen's footsteps having the ability to help members of the community.**

So, remember our young people are watching. What kind of faith are we modeling for others. Your small acts of faithfulness may not seem important, but you are influencing others

A third way that our young people are shaped is by some other experiences that our congregation provides that can help faith to mature. One of our students wrote:

Since before I can remember, I have been going to church. I used to wait for my escape to Sunday School without every truly understanding what church meant. I remember when I thought to myself, "If I can't see or hear God, why should I believe that he is even real?" I didn't suppose I had ever felt God's presence, and it wasn't until later in life that I had a connection with God.

The first time I can remember feeling God's presence was on the Algonquin Canoe trip in 2019. We were paddling through the water. I focused on how the water rippled as I pushed my oar through it when it felt as if something had lifted my chin to see the nature around me. Water birds were chirping, beaver dams poked out of water with beautiful plants in sprout nearby. The air was clear and breathable. A warm feeling birthed in my heart as though this is what life is supposed to be.

Coming home with this sense of renewal, I would notice this feeling while at church. I felt safe, calm and loved.

A fourth way that our congregational life shapes our young people is through opportunities for service to others. Several of our young people wrote words such a – **The Church also gives me opportunities to help people through mission projects, such as the packaging of 10,000 meals and the food pantry. I feel that God's love should be shared with others, and the Church helps me find ways to do just that.** Another wrote: **The Church also does a service the "The Ten Thousand Meals" project. This year I participated in the project. This project helps us to help people all around the country.**

A fifth way the church shapes the life of our young people is through the strength of community. One of our students had a recent experience of the power of community when writing: **As I have witnessed firsthand while my aunt was in the hospital, it is very nice to have someone other than your closest relatives know that people are praying for you and will bring you things you need. Being able to help people in the church that really need it would be great. When we did the Spiritual Gifts Analysis, my gift was giving. I would like to be able to use this and to help and give who people who are in need.**

One final way that congregational life affects our young people is more subjective. More than any previous group, this confirmation class wrote papers with the words that conveyed feelings. They perceive this congregation to be a place of nurture and support.

One student wrote: **It is a special thing to feel like you belong, and I think everyone in our church feels this way because the atmosphere and closeness to God that our church gives.** Another wrote: **Joining the church means something different to everyone, but to me it means joining a fun and welcoming community. Joining the church also means being offered lots of amazing opportunities. I believe that I'm ready to continue my spiritual journey by joining the church.** A third student wrote **For me joining the church makes me feel closer to God and the people of the church.**

We cannot complete our spiritual pilgrimage on our own. Remember when Jesus began his earthly ministry one of the first things he did was gather disciples around him. Jesus knew that he needed the support of others.

It is no different for you and me. We cannot be isolated Christians. We are not just to come to worship and commune with God and leave. The Church, when it truly is the Church, is a place where believers share one another's burdens and encourage each other in faith. May we continue to shape our common life, that the experiences that these confirmands have experienced will continue into the future. May future generations be able to say as one of confirmands wrote:

When I think of Clarence Presbyterian Church I am reminded of the ministry of Jesus. He served others, taught very effectively, and he had a deep relationship with his disciples. As a member of this church I will strive to follow the example of Jesus, just as I see the other members doing.