

“A Message to Our Confirmands”
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Confirmation Sunday
June 3, 2007

An old drunk stumbles across a baptismal service on Sunday afternoon down by the river.

He proceeds to walk into the water and stand next to the preacher. The minister notices the old drunk and says, "Mister, are you ready to find Jesus?"

The drunk looks back and says, "Yes, preacher, I sure am."

The minister dunks the fellow under the water and pulls him right back up.

"Have you found Jesus?" the preacher asks. "Nooo, I didn't!" said the drunk.

The preacher then dunks him under for quite a bit longer, brings him up, and says, "Now, brother, have you found Jesus?"

"Noooo, I have not, Reverend."

The preacher, in disgust, holds the man under for at least 30 seconds this time, brings him out of the water, and says in a harsh tone, "My God, man, have you found Jesus yet?"

The old drunk wipes his eyes and says to the preacher, "Are you sure this is where he fell in?"

I don't know, Confirmation Class, "have we found Jesus yet?"

First, I must begin by saying what a joy it has been to work with this wonderful group of 9th graders. This has been my first year of teaching confirmation class and we have been on a journey together. What a long, strange trip it has been! 16 teenagers and 4 teachers on a quest, searching for answers only to find more questions. During our journeying together, we also grew to know one another in deeper and more profound ways as we talked about our doubts, our troubles, and our stumbling blocks. We've crammed onto old dirty couches, ate lots of pizza together, prayed together, and made our way through the understanding of scriptures, the sacraments, and our denomination.

And along the way, we've asked ourselves many times....have we found what we are looking for? Have we figured out what we believe?

And those questions may still linger for you today on Confirmation Sunday and may linger for many years to come. I realize that it was powerful for you to learn in the faith interviews you did with our adult and older members of Hancock that they still have many of the same questions and wonders that you do. In the United Church of Christ, you don't need a "Come to Jesus" moment in order to become a member of our church.

We believe that the faithful life is a journey, one of questing and discovery, not a strict adherence to a set of beliefs.

Today is your Confirmation day and today, both you and the church recognize your faith journey and the continual journeying that will occur within our community here at Hancock. A church is a place where you find how to practice your faith, even as you are still working out the details of what you believe. You don't need to have it all figured out in order to be a member of our church but instead, today we invite you to journey alongside us, as we learn how to live out our faith and questions. And as you enter the Hancock church family, which I consider a responsibility and privilege, I have some very simple advice for you...

Be open.
Be honest.
Be gracious.
Be faithful.

End of sermon. Just kidding. You wish you were that lucky. I'm going to take a few minutes to expound on each of these points.

The first, Be open.

I believe that God is at work doing a new thing here at Hancock church. As Peter and Gay move on after their faithful ministry here, we at Hancock face a new time of listening and discerning how God might be moving in our church. We must ask ourselves - In what ways is God desiring for us to make the gospel relevant to our world today? In what way will Hancock be a shining city on a hill to our town and neighboring communities? How does God desire for us to use our power and gifts for the service of others? God is Still Speaking. Let's be open to the new things that God is doing here and challenge ourselves to get involved.

Second, be honest.

I believe that in order for community to be real, we as its members need to be honest. In order to feel connected to Hancock and invested in the community here, we need to be honest with one another about our feelings, our questions, and our doubts. That's not an easy task for a New Englander. And it takes trust and the understanding that this is a safe place where you can be authentically who you are and you will be met with love.

One of our most beloved groups within Hancock is the Hancock Youth Group. I believe that HYG is so powerful because our 9th graders enter HYG, knowing that it is a safe place and a sanctuary from the rigors and pressures of regular Lexington life. They expect to be treated differently than they are in school.

I believe that kind of life-changing, spirit-infused community life can be found not only in HYG, but everywhere here at Hancock. Be open and honest with one another and trust that the divine may even be found in the person in the pew next to you.

Third, be gracious.

It's always easiest for us to judge and assess others and to claim to have the moral authority for what is right and wrong. The universal Christian church has had a bad track record of using the Bible to decide the will of God, to choose who makes it to heaven, to determine that one gender is better than another, or to decide that one person's sexual orientation is unnatural. There are realms within Christianity, which still choose to use the Bible and their Christian faith as a means of judgment and determination of moral character.

But when I read the Bible and specifically the gospels, I see nothing in the life of Jesus but grace. In fact, the only people he treats with judgment are the priests and Pharisees who act as though they have it all figured out and need to assess everyone else's behavior. Jesus is most harsh with them. But with women, children, the elderly, and the sick, he shows radical grace. When society says that these people are unworthy, Jesus says that they are the Kingdom of God.

I hope you will find that kind of grace in our church and that you will extend that grace to those you meet, especially to those who are radically different from you.

And lastly, and most importantly, be faithful.

As I've said before, being full of faith is not the same as being full of belief. Regardless of what you believe or don't believe, seek opportunities to be faithful in your life.

As many of you know, I've spent the last three days on a mission trip with several young adults and HYG alum from our church. They have chosen to return from college, take time off from work and away from their regular routine to serve the underprivileged people of Downeast Maine. On the trip, we have been working on mobile homes, helping to insulate them so that next winter might be a little warmer. During the evenings, the group has spent countless hours, sitting around telling stories about church experiences in Sunday school, JYO, and HYG, only to take breaks to deep-fry some Oreos). Still today, the members of this trip continue to make more memories for themselves within our church.

In his book, *The Worst Hard Time*, Timothy Egan writes about farmers and families who chose to remain in the Midwest during the Dustbowl of 1930s. He vividly describes how the dust storms not only destroyed the land and harvests, but also made even leaving the house deathly hazardous. The swirling dust storms could arrive quickly, coating a person's eyes with layers of sand, soil, and dust, making it futile to see one's way back to the house or barn. In one story, Egan writes of a man who left the house with his daughter on a Sunday when a sudden dust storm sweeps over the area. The man is forced

to the ground where there is only six inches of breathable air and his daughter is lost in his sight. He crawls his way back to his home, yet is unable to search for his daughter for an entire day. The next day, he finds her, alive, huddled in a barn, only _ mile away. To overcome the loss of space, sense of direction, and sight that these sudden storms can bring, the farmers tied ropes to themselves from their houses and barns. They called these ropes: lifelines. Here, they were tethered to a place of refuge, and regardless of the storms' intensity or how chaotic and disoriented they may have felt, their lifeline allowed them to venture out and then ensured that they would have a safe sanctuary in which to return.

I hope that Hancock can always be that safe sanctuary for you. A secure place in the storm. And, as you venture through the chaos of life and at times feel disoriented and uncertain of yourself, I hope that you can always remember the lifeline you have connecting you to this safe and loving home.

This is your home now, welcome.