

May 23, 2010: ADOPTED, CONFIRMED
Romans 8:14-17; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b
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What if you gave a party and no one came? That crossed my mind Wednesday evening. We had scheduled deacon training for 6:30, but at 6:40 nobody was here. So I made some calls. No one answered and, since I'd just finished an audio book in which nuclear war nearly ended the world, I could only assume that's what had happened. As it turned out, the time had changed and I hadn't heard. On Thursday when it happened again, I didn't know what to think. Springwater co-sponsored a parenting class for the Greater Estacada community with Clackamas Women's Services. We promoted the daylights out of the class, "Healthy Relationships for Teens," and four people attended. We'd just given a party and nobody came (hardly).

When I first started preaching, I read Fred Craddock, who said that all preaching needs to address, "how to be the church, how to be a Christian." Perhaps I'm more sensitive to that notion after spending the last year teaching our confirmands about the church and faith. I wonder if, instead of "how" as Fred would have it, I wonder if we ought to address "what." As in, "What is the church and who are we in it?" Last week's two experiences make me wonder if we should ask instead, "Why is the church?"

We live in the None Zone, where most people check the "none" box on surveys of religious affiliation. Given that and the over-committed lives we live, I will forego the birthday of the church sentiment for Pentecost and focus on the witness of these young people affirming their faith today. After all, I let the confirmands choose the preaching text. Just keep in mind that the first Pentecost event happened to a community gathered in prayerful expectation. The confirmation we enact today remembers that faith is not a singular, private act. These young people affirm their baptismal promises (in front of us) "to try to be like Jesus" as we remember our baptismal promises (in front of them), and promise our support. If you recall, *The Message* version of today's text says God's Spirit "confirms who we really are." The NRSV lets us know that God's spirit "bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" and heirs of God's household. In other words, today's service of confirmation makes public what God has already done, that these young people have been adopted into the family of God, and they are contributing members of that family.

Several of my friends have adopted children not of their race. They tell me that, for the kids, adoption is never a settled matter—especially if they don't look like their parents. The question that's always there for these kids is, "Who do I really belong to?" It's as if they are always proving that they belong. What Paul says today in Romans is that Jesus is God's way of saying, "You don't need to prove anything." We can forget all our shenanigans and sacrifices, it is the Spirit who confirms "who we really are," and *whose* we really are.

At the confirmation discernment retreat, I challenged the confirmands to think about what sort of church they wanted to be part of. Because, whether they confirm today or wait a few years, whether they stick around or think today is "graduation" for them, they *are* the church of the future, present or absent. Eastminster Presbyterian in Gresham is a church where the "young people" are the ones who have only recently reached retirement age. For the last three years, the congregation has engaged in a discernment process regarding what sort of church they want to be. Should they close or try to undergo a revitalization process? With a median age of 85, they decided they were too worn out to engage in the intensive 10-year process transformation requires. What they decided was to leave a place for a faith presence in their community. They recognize that once they are gone, things will be different. They won't be around, but they will leave shoulders on which others may stand. With that decision, they have experienced freedom and vitality. Under the leadership of Pastor Brian Herron, they explore scripture but they also consult current texts, using various media. For instance, they go to movies together and discuss them afterwards over a meal. What does *Avatar* teach us about our faith and what it means to be human? They live in the present, but they prepare for a future they will not see.

What we leave for the future church is more important than we are individually. If there is going to be a future for the church, we have to do more than “only what we want to do,” living what the apostle Paul calls our “old do-it-yourself life,” the one about which he says, there’s “nothing in it for us.” What convinced us that my Grama knew she had no future, that she had Alzheimer’s disease, was that she only ate Oreos. Why would she work hard to eat vegetables she didn’t even like when she knew there was nothing in it for her? She had no stake in the future. I learned at Thursday’s parenting class that abuse is not occasional accidental meanness; it is systematic, intentional, and for the purpose of gaining power and control over another. Does church *abuse* us? Do spiritual disciplines oppress? There are those who read the last words of today’s passage and think that’s what Paul means when he says, “if we *suffer* with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” That statement is not a blank check for the church to inflict pain on us. But when our lives are too full and it is faith-related activities that get eliminated, what does that say? Regarding the church’s prophetic mission to declare the “saving life, death, resurrection” of Christ until he comes again, is the question “why” or is it “what” or is it “how”?

Once, when I was in an abusive situation, someone quoted today’s passage from Romans. “You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear.” Faith in God is supposed to be life-giving. Lives of faith are empowered by the Spirit. They have purpose. Collectively, our lives form a community of witnessing prophets. If you gave a party and no one came, would you check to make sure you had the right time or would you wonder whether you should even do parties? Would you make sure people got the invitation or would you just have your own private party? We are only witnesses to the party, friends.

It’s not about us.

Thanks be to God.

It’s not about us.

[Return to Home Page](#)

[Return to Sermon Page](#)