

**#waytruthlife, a sermon based on John 14:1-14**

**Preached by Rev. Elizabeth Smith-Bartlett**

**May 10, 2020**

Dear Confirmands,

I'm writing this sermon in the form of a letter since we can't be physically together today. First and foremost, I want you to know how much I have enjoyed getting to know you this year and being on the confirmation journey together. I have cherished our conversations and watching you grow in your faith. Your energy and curiosity are joys to witness. I'm so grateful for each one of you, and am so proud of the people you are and are becoming.

I came across this quote recently, and it made me think of you. The author is Robert Clark, and this is from his book called My Grandfather's House: A Genealogy of Faith and Doubt. He says, "Conversion and the practice of religion are the taking on of a perpetual labor as quotidian as housework. Faith is never complete, at rest in the same state, or located in the same place, because we are ourselves in motion. We are forever needing to turn and be turned toward it; to discover and be discovered by it."

Your confirmation today is the culmination of this year's class and all of the thinking and talking and writing that went along with it. You've spent many hours with each other learning about many different components that go into faith--the Trinity, the Bible, the history and confessions of the church, prayer, service, worship. You've talked about faith with your faith partners. You've participated in faith practices at St. John the Divine. You've written your faith statements and presented them to Session. Today marks the day that you have completed all the requirements that were set before you. You're done!

And yet your faith journey is far from over--and in fact, as you are taking it on as your own today, a new chapter in that journey is beginning right now. Your faith journey is never complete, and echoing Robert Clark's words, it is my hope and prayer for each of you on your confirmation day that you will be forever needing to turn and be turned toward it; to discover and be discovered by it.

This quote also makes me think about the gospel reading from John that I read right before this. I know it was a little wordy--that's just John's writing style. I hope you will go back and read it when you have time, and sit with it for a while to let the words sink in.

For now, what's most important to remember is the "I am" statement that Jesus makes in verse 6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." This is the high point of the reading--the

hashtag, if you will--and in many ways, it's the high point of John's entire theology. Jesus is saying here that he is both the access to and the embodiment of life with God. In other words, Jesus's way of truth and life is the way to get to God. And Jesus's way of truth and life is what life with God looks like. When we hear Jesus's words, we trust that they are God's words. When we learn about Jesus's ways, we trust that they are God's ways. When we see who Jesus loves and what Jesus stands for, we trust that in Jesus we see where God's heart is in our world.

And confirmands, that's what the life of Christian faith is all about--paying attention to Jesus and seeking to align our lives with the way Jesus lived his life, because in Jesus, we see God and know God.

And this is where that quote connects with our reading from John, because if we are doing all of these things, then following Jesus on the way means that we are always in motion, always turning towards Jesus to show us the way and turning back towards Jesus when we lose our way...always discovering new questions to ponder and being discovered by God's grace.

This belief is at the heart of Christianity, and yet it has also become a stumbling block for many people. And so as we confirm your faith today, I think it's also important to confirm what faith is not meant to be:

Faith is not meant to be a weapon.

Faith is not meant to be an exclusive club.

Faith is not meant to be narrow-minded.

Remember that timeline on the early church that we did in class? Remember how there were almost 300 years between Jesus' life and Christianity becoming a major religion? John writes in this in-between time, and so when we read these words, we have to remember what was happening in this in-between time--the Jewish people were in the middle of an internal debate over whether or not Jesus was God incarnate. And as the years went on it became harder and harder for both sides to stay together, and so they started to split. John writes to the community that believes in the incarnation in these early years to encourage them in the midst of conflict and struggle. This is who we are, he assures them...we are the ones who follow Jesus, and through following Jesus, we experience God. Jesus is *our* way, *our* truth, *our* life.

If I'm totally honest, there have been times in my life when I've been hesitant to make this claim for myself. It wasn't that I didn't believe it, because I did. But I didn't always know that I could both claim this for myself and also value and learn from other religious traditions like Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam, because growing up that wasn't the message that I always got from others.

Confirmands, I want you to know that being a Christian and believing in Jesus doesn't make you anti-everything else. That's not what faith is about and that's not what this reading from John's gospel is about either. Faith is supposed to be a beginning to a conversation, not an ending to one. Faith is supposed to spark our sense of curiosity and wonder, not explain everything away. And Christian faith is supposed to be a reflection of the religion of Jesus and not just a religion about what we've turned him into.

So beloved, here's the deal: Today we are asking you to turn toward the way of Jesus by taking on your faith journeys as your own and continuing down this path. Today we are asking you to keep discovering Jesus' truth as you keep growing and learning and changing. Today we are asking you to regularly take a good look at your life and ask yourself if it is a reflection of your faith and values or if there might be some more turning towards Jesus' way that needs to happen. (And today, for those of us listening in on this letter, today we are asked to do the same, because we aren't done yet either, are we?) It's a tall order, but the good news is you don't have to do it alone.

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This ending to confirmation hasn't really been ideal, has it? So much change has been thrown your way, in such a short amount of time, and yet you have taken it all in stride. Thank you for your resilience in the midst of so much fear and uncertainty and grief.

There's a blessing from a pastor named William Sloane Coffin that I love, and I want it to be your blessing as you begin this new chapter of your faith journeys in this particular time. It goes like this:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

May God give you the grace not to sell yourselves short;

Grace to risk something big for something good;

Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth,  
and too small for anything but love.

May God take your minds and think through them

May God take your lips and speak through them

May God take your hands and work through them

May God take your hearts and set them on fire.

Amen.