

**Church of the Beatitudes
United Church of Christ**

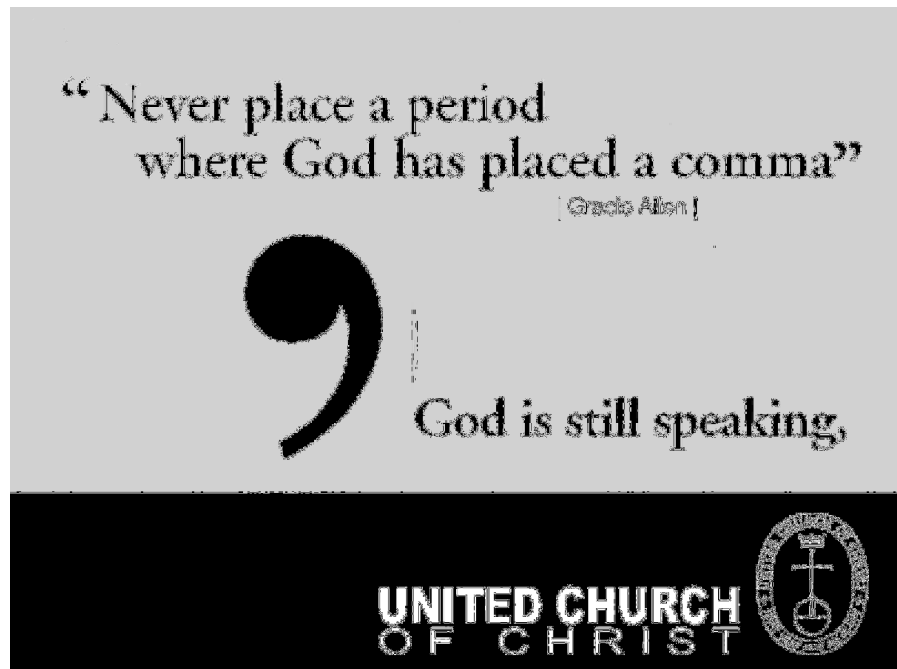
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SERMON

“Class Dismissed”

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

May 4, 2008

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Scripture: 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

Two years ago, Kyle Dodig, 38, of Monmouth County, New Jersey, wasn't sure he believed in God. That realization led the self-proclaimed lapsed Catholic to spend a year reading the Bible, searching for ways to bring faith back into his life. This year, Dodig vowed to visit a different house of worship every weekend for 12 months. He has been to Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Unitarian, and interdenominational churches, and he hopes the journey will eventually provide him with a regular spiritual home. He calls it “window shopping for the soul.”¹

This year's confirmation journey might be called window shopping for the soul, but it was more one-stop shopping, and at a particular boutique rather than at a mall. Our group began with seven, with six of those having grown up in this church, and one who just came to this church a little over a year ago. Most remember the old nursery and the reflecting pool on the courtyard. Most have memories of Sunday School classes and teachers, Christmas angels and baby Jesus's. They have been Cherub singers and acolytes, vacation Bible schoolers and arts campers. They have consumed more than their fair share of donuts and Kool-Aid, at coffee hours.

And they faithfully showed up this year, nearly every Wednesday night, after Taste & See, back in a not so great room in the Youth Center. Together we went to Prescott and did a ropes challenge course, including a high challenge wall where it took two people working together to climb up tires and ladders and ropes in order to reach the top and make it back down. Together we sat around a smoky camp fire and shared our memories of how we each came to be at Church of the Beatitudes. We came back every Wednesday night and shared some of what was going on in our lives: school, 8th grade (who of us wishes for that again?), homework, softball teams, movies, fights, heartbreaks, families, heartbreaks, and we learned about our faith.

The symbols you see in the banner are their symbols of faith.

The Bible: We didn't read the whole book, but we did spend some time reading the good parts, like, “Women shall be silent in the churches.” “Slaves obey your masters.” And those different stories about Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Will the real Jesus please stand up? And a little bit of “I want my Jesus back.”

Candles, crosses, bread and cup: Symbols that carry memory, but meaning exactly what? Put yourself in a 13, 14 year old body and brain. Think of their lifetime, born in 1993 and 1994, some of the headlines read:

Bill Clinton, President. The first World Trade Center bombing. The Church of England ordains its first female priests. Nelson Mandela is inaugurated as South

¹ USA Today, One Man's Winding Path back to Religion, 3/25/08.

Africa's first Black president. O.J. Simpson is driving in a white Bronco. Iraq is accused of having weapons of mass destruction. Macintosh Computers releases its PowerBooks portable computer. The Dow Jones Industrial Average reaches 3,900, and the Buffalo Bills lose their fourth consecutive Super Bowl. Church of the Beatitudes is still on the corner of 7th Avenue and Glendale, with its second Senior Pastor Rev. Martin Copenhaver, then interim Rev. Lionel Miles, and then Rev. Steve Sterner, any of which just might have baptized this front row (our confirmands). All these headlines become context for families raising their children in a changing culture. In the midst of the secular, what does it mean to come into a space that is sacred, where cross and candles, bread and cup take on a radically different meaning?

Prominent on the banner, I hope you can also see people, community, diversity, inclusivity: Words we heard over and over in the Appreciative Inquiry conversations, Church of the Beatitudes at its best, and one of the eight points of Progressive Christianity.

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean we are Christians who invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable (including but not limited to): believers and agnostics, conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, women and men, those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, those of all races and cultures, those of all classes and abilities, those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope.²

I think we had all of these in our class, from believers to questioning skeptics to self-proclaimed agnostics. We always begin the confirmation program with a meeting of the adults, saying, "When you had your child baptized, you promised to raise them in faith. The congregation promised to help raise them in faith. Now we are going to teach them about church history, denominations, this church, and the what and why of what we do in church. Your child will come to a point when he or she will decide if they want to confirm those vows. They may get to the end of the journey and say 'I'm not ready. I'm not sure. I can't do this, yet, now, maybe ever.'" And we always say, "That's okay. That is a decision we will support, and we will continue to include the person making that decision in the community all the same." No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here still applies.

We all have a whole lifetime to figure this faith journey out. Faith is a journey, not a destination. It needs to be a journey that is safe, especially in these young people's lives where schools and playgrounds and street corners can have real bullies. Church of the Beatitudes must be a bully-free zone. Our church culture is a culture where we are curious together, where we look at possibilities together. We are learning how to commit together to overcome barriers and obstacles. This confirmation class taught me, confirmed in me, that our differences strengthen us.

² http://www.tpc.org/about/8points_detail.cfm?id=13&point=4

At last Wednesday evening's Design phase of the Appreciative Inquiry process, Leroy Calbom read a beautiful statement of faith about the purpose of the church. It fell under a category of spiritual nurture and growth and was a call to the journey. I asked if I could share his words:

The Bible describes how the "Breath" of the Spirit blows over and through us where it will, including where we least expect it. It can inspire, uplift, and give us a sense of new birth. It is not subject to our control or manipulation, but when we experience its healing, redeeming, sacred presence, people with or without faith are left with little doubt as to its authenticity.

We can transcend the ordinary by holding a newborn baby, listening to beautiful music, feeling overwhelmed before magnificent art forms, or finding intimacy with nature's grand canyons, mountain challenges, or ocean discoveries, or experiencing ourselves elevated by the words or touch of a truly caring person. The times and circumstances vary, but the wonder endures beyond both.

How do we share our stories, connect to one another through our stories, and become a spiritual gift one to another?

These confirmands have a story, just as you do. I have been blessed to have been a part of their unfolding story, and I hope you will enter into and listen to their stories. Like all of us, God is not finished with them yet. In what many call a post-modern world, a post-Christian age, an age of anti-denominationalism and an increasingly un-churched culture, it is nothing short of a miracle to me that these young people invite us to share this sacred moment together. You are their community. You are the voice saying to them, "Everything is possible and almost nothing is certain.³ We are here for you."

You are the hearts and minds offering them wisdom and truth, saying "Truth may not be something to be discovered out there, but created within. Let us share our truths together."

You are the soul shining a light on their unfolding paths, "When life gets really difficult, count yourself fortunate. We will be there for you again and again."

Class may be dismissed. But we are really just getting started.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Vaclav Havel, The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World speech, 1994
<http://www.worldtrans.org/whole/havelspeech.html>