

REACHING FOR THE FUTURE
First Confirmation: Continued Hope
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April 29th, 2007

Luke 2:41-46

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

There once was a group of pastors from a small town who gathered once a week to talk about their churches and the struggles they faced in ministry. One week as they visited over coffee they realized that each of their churches had recently had some bats move into their bell towers. Over the next several weeks their bat problems were a large part of the conversation they had with one another. They shared stories about failed attempts to get rid of the bats and they schemed about ways that they might be able to get rid of them. Finally one week as they gathered together the pastor from the United Methodist Church proudly told his colleagues that he had managed to get rid of the bats. They all wanted to know how he had done it and so he explained, "When nothing else had worked I went ahead and baptized them and made them members of the church. Not a single one's been back since."

This joke illustrates the unfortunate reality that many churches face. People come to get baptized, people want to be confirmed, people join the church, and then they're never seen again. I tell this story this morning because all too often this is the case with confirmation. More often than we'd like to admit Confirmation is treated as some kind of

a graduation from church. Deals are struck between parents and kids that if they'll only finish the confirmation program then they don't have to attend church anymore.

It is my hope though that through these last nine months this year's group of confirmands has come to understand that this process and the celebrations of this weekend are not an ending, not a graduation, but only one step on their journey of faith and life.

The Confirmation curriculum that was used by Ridge Church this year is a hybrid that Kathy O'Brien and Michelle Anderson put together merging several different programs. One of those programs is a United Methodist Curriculum called Claim the Name. And that's exactly what this process is to be, a process through which these young people can come to claim the name Christian for themselves. Through confirmation these young people have examined the Christian Faith and ultimately decided that they want to join themselves with Ridge United Methodist Church as they continue their journey as Christians.

This morning we celebrate the confirmation of these 14 young people; In essence though this is their first confirmation – their first opportunity to proclaim publicly their desire to call themselves Christian. They will have many more opportunities, as each of us has, to continue confirming their faith through different times and places of life. As these 14 young people confirm their faith for the first time today, each of us has the opportunity to confirm our faith and our trust in God once again.

In the gospel of Luke there is a great story about Jesus as a young man in what was one of his first public instances of teaching. It comes from Luke 2:41-46:

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festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

In this story a 12 year old Jesus, just about old enough for confirmation at Ridge Church, stands in front of the elders in the temple and teaches. This action is not something that someone has put him up to or told him he has to do. It's clearly not something he's doing for the sake of his parents. Jesus stands up and teaches and shares the word of God as a natural extension of his relationship with God. For each of us this morning, those who are being confirmed and those who have the opportunity to confirm their faith again, Jesus serves as the ultimate example to follow. He shares God's good news as a natural part of who he is, not just once, but continuously throughout his life. So too are each and everyone one of us called to continue in the ministries to which God has called us.

We are currently in the midst of our *Reaching Out To The Future* campaign, a campaign designed to eliminate the debt from our building and renovation in 2003 and more importantly to raise money for the next phase of our renovation and growth. And as we talk this morning about reaching out to the future and as we confirm these 14 young people I have great hope because they are doing just what we're talking about – reaching out to the future.

Hope is a biblical concept that I fear is often misunderstood and underestimated in our world today. As we celebrate confirmation today as a part of our *Reaching Out To The Future* campaign I want to talk for just a minute about reclaiming the value of hope and what it means for us to be people of hope.

In general we have become a people who wish and want a great deal more than we hope. We wish we could have more free time; we wish we had a little more expendable income each month; we want newer and nicer things than we have. We want to be happy and content and in order to do this we wish for lots of different material things. In the midst of our wishing and our wanting as a culture I fear we have lost sight of what it really means to be a people of hope.

When a young Barack Obama was working as an organizer in Chicago he was wrestling with issues of direction and meaning and purpose. One Sunday morning he found himself at Trinity United Church of Christ over on 95th St. on the South Side. That particular morning the preacher, the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, preached a sermon called *The Audacity of Hope*. Barack Obama's most recent book carries that same title.

The idea of Dr. Wright's sermon and Obama's book is for me the core of our Christian understanding of Hope – that against all odds we are to have hope. It is a theme that runs through our faith over and over again. When the Israelites were in bondage and things seemed impossible - God brought hope. When Abraham and Sarah longed to have children but were sure they were too old – God brought hope. As Jesus hung on a cross and things seemed lost – God brought hope. When the early church struggled against persecution by the Roman Empire, the gift of the Holy Spirit came as a gift from God – a gift that brought hope.

As people who have connected ourselves with God's work in the world we are to live as people of hope. It is at times audacious, radical, sometimes it even seems crazy, but we know that God is able to bring about amazing things from seemingly hopeless places.

And so in the midst of our *Reaching Out To The Future* – in our striving to raise the needed money to finish paying off our fellowship hall and to move into the next phase of renovation, we are called as Christians – as members of Ridge Church - to live and act as if we are truly people of hope. This is exactly what we have the opportunity to do on May 13th as we bring forth our one time gifts as well as our pledges for 3 year commitments.

These 14 young people who are being confirmed today provide great hope for me about what the future of the church and the world might have in store. Let us all be as bold as them in proclaiming our faith and let us all have the audacity to hope for God's work in our midst to become our greatest priority. As we all continue to confirm our faith, to hope in God's ability to bring miracles from the most amazing places, as we continue to reach to the future let us take risks together and pledge all of ourselves – our time, our talents, our gifts, and our service to make sure that we are doing our part to partner with God as we seek to bring about miracles here at Ridge Church and throughout the world.

I am a hopeful person. And the faith and witness of these young people, the commitment of so many of you here at Ridge Church, the power and ability for God to work in the midst of all situations to bring about good, give me great hope as we *Reach Out To The Future* together.