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Dear Friends,

On two different Saturdays this past month, we presented the twelve members of our 8th grade class to Bishop Beckwith at our Cathedral in Newark to be confirmed. In Confirmation, candidates take on for themselves the commitments to the core principles of the Christian life which had been made for them on their behalf by their parents and godparents at their baptism, usually when they were infants.

Why not wait? We baptize infants (rather than waiting for people to be older) to express our belief that God welcomes us into full fellowship long before we can think, say, or do anything to earn God's approval. God accepts us because God is loving, not because we are deserving, or because we have the right answers. What if we do not even have the right, or good, intentions—does God accept us then, too? Let's put that on the list of topics to address at some later date, and get back to Confirmation.

If we take God's approval as a license to pursue our own goals and appetites ["After all, I'm already loved, so why not have fun? What have I got to lose? God is forgiving, right?"], then paradoxically we take what is intended for our comfort and nurture and turn it into the agency of our destruction. So while it is a very good thing that God is loving, it may be almost equally important that we understand that that love is to guide us to a better life, not to give us blanket permission to do whatever we want.

No hidden clauses Whenever we baptize someone we say aloud—the Episcopal Church is a Full Disclosure denomination—what exactly we think it means to live fully into the love and acceptance of God. Early in the baptismal service (Prayer Book, page 302), we describe the necessary preparation—how we turn away from whatever pulls us away from God, and turn and move towards recognizing Jesus' power in two forms: first his love ["Savior"] and then his authority ["Lord"].

We go on to say that the Christian life is premised in a clear, and defined, understanding of God (page 304). This is not a "spiritual-but-not-religious" undertaking: we begin our commitment to the Christian life in the Baptismal Covenant, with some very specific statements about the identity and nature of God before we get to any statements about our own actions. The liturgy reflects basic

human psychology—our actions flow from our beliefs, so to get our actions in good order, we start by being clear about what we believe.

What comes first One sometimes hears that the Covenant begins with the vows we make or reaffirm (Will you continue, will you persevere, and so on), but the Prayer Book does not support that contention. The Baptismal Covenant (p. 304 – 305) places the three affirmations of belief about God (the Apostles' Creed in question and answer form) as the first elements of The Baptismal Covenant. This distinction matters because it reflects our belief that right action grows out of a right understanding of God, who does not change. Right action is less reliably grounded in our own good ideas, which are subject to the considerable vagaries of personal idiosyncrasy and cultural bias.

But the Covenant does not stop with just talking about God; it goes on to spell out some of the core manifestations of that belief in day-to-day life. You hear this list often, but until we all get it right all the time, it's worth looking at again:

- Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
- Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Oppressive and narrow-minded Every time I hear people complain about how oppressive, restrictive, or narrow-minded the Christian faith is, I compare the world as it is now to how it would be if everyone accepted the authority of these core Baptismal vows as the principles to define how life—personal and public—should be lived. Until actual life, small scale and large, looks better in practice than these principles, I think the world needs them, it needs people who will affirm and demonstrate these principles, and we all need to strive for greater faithfulness to these elements of the Christian life which we so often affirm.

And Confirmation is one of the means the Church offers to refocus our attention on these core elements of our faith. In many ways at St. Elizabeth's we start to prepare young people for Confirmation almost immediately after they are baptized. The Baptismal Covenant—who God is and how we should live—provides the governing principles of our Church School (both content and culture), our music program, our youth activities, and every element of our life together, for adults as well as for young people.

And in the 8th Grade we draw all of that together in a year of focused activity and review to invite the members of that class to take on for themselves the responsibility to live the life chosen for them when they were baptized.

Let them decide for themselves Sometimes I hear people speak disparagingly about parents making religious choices for their children: “Why not let them make up their own minds, rather than force them into some arbitrary belief system?” My answer is that we are always making choices for our children based on what we think is good and right. We correct them, we guide them, we teach and coach them, and those choices grow out of our own beliefs, whether they are organized or just pulled together from our experience and predilections. When we send children to school, or educate them at home, we are imposing, directly or by proxy, scores of beliefs and assumptions

every day. To stand aside and do nothing with or for one's children might seem not so much open-minded as empty-headed.

I compare religion to language. I grew up speaking English not because anyone in my family thought it was the best or only language, but because it was our language. Practicing it for 60+ years, I have become comfortable and accomplished in it. I do not think everyone in the world has to speak English, and I am grateful that I can limp along in a few other languages. But I think knowing *some* language is very close to the center of human identity.

Had in some bizarre experiment my parents insulated me from all language until I was in my twenties so that I might then choose freely on my own, I doubt if that scrupulous lack of bias would have given me a richer life. Because of their choice, I will never have the benefit of a native fluency in Spanish, German, or even Latin. That they did so much—sacrificing both time and money—to help me to grow into our family language I experience as a gift, not an oppressive act of arbitrary restriction. I suggest we look at the choices we make about religious language, education, and practice in a similar light.

Just as there is growing evidence of the powerful and unique role of language in the formation of the brain and subsequent development of identity and character, I think a structured engagement with the grammar, vocabulary, and daily use of the religious life has great potential to make us more developed human beings. And perhaps its absence produces a corresponding deprivation and distortion of who and what we might be.

And I say “religious” here, not the easier “spiritual” by intention. My sense is that to be spiritual but not religious is to affirm the value of sound without the discipline of language. Simply making sounds has some modest ability to establish communication. But language, even with the difficulties of grammar, spelling, words with meanings restricted by definitions, difficult and irregular constructions, odd idioms, and the occasional archaic expression, language for all of these annoying elements, offers a somewhat wider range of opportunities than the much easier to offer undifferentiated sound.

Not all ideas are good Language can be used for great good or very much the opposite. Because it can be an agent of evil, we may be careful about how it is used, but we do not simply throw it out.

Similarly with education. Not all education is equally good. There are vicious, ugly ideas—I think of matters relating to race, gender, and ethnic groups for starters—which, when presented with authority by adults to children have a great potential to do lasting personal and social damage. So also with religion—while some ideas may promote health and life, others might have just the opposite impact. Simply throwing up one's hands and saying we won't talk about religion because there are some bad ideas presented in its name strikes me as being on a level with closing schools because some ideas are racist, sexist, or oppressive to those different from the local cultural majority.

We need good religion and good theology just like we need good education and good pedagogy. We may affirm our beliefs and practices without denouncing everything that is not ours. Ridgewood High School can merit our support and even admiration without our having to scorn or reject private, parochial, or neighboring high schools. We may choose one or the other without challenging the right to exist of a school to which we would not send our children. I suspect we are sufficiently sophisticated to think that we may have made the best choice, while recognizing that others may think, with cogent arguments, very differently for themselves.

This month I commend the parents, godparents, grandparents, teachers, friends, coaches, choir leaders, acolyte mentors, and all the others who prepared, guided, and encouraged the young people

of our Confirmation Class who came forward before Bishop Beckwith to step up and take their place in the great and ancient tradition of people who seek God's grace and guidance to shape their own lives and the life of the world. The Bishop prayed that God might renew in each of them the covenant made for them at their baptism. We prayed that each of them might go forward into the world to perform whatever services God will set before them. This is the beginning of what can be a life full of the receiving and the sharing of great blessings. May we each remember that we, too, are part of this project, and look with grateful thanksgiving on our newest group of reinforcements.

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Rector