

Dear Friends,

One of the predictable elements of our Opening Sunday is that the members of the eighth grade confirmation class, standing before the congregation at the beginning of the 10:00 am service, will mumble their responses in barely audible tones. Whether or not they have their order of service in front of them, despite being warned that the next question is addressed to them, regardless of being prompted with the actual words of their response, this wonderfully gifted, bright, energetic, highly educated and often high-spirited diverse group seems almost magically robbed of not only the ability to speak but also of the strength to raise their gaze above their shoes.

God, please let this be over soon. This exercise doubtless provides an opportunity for the strengthening of the prayer life of the confirmands (“Please let this be over soon, please let none of my friends from school be out there, please let me be invisible if I do not make eye contact with anyone...”). But there are other good reasons for calling these young people, their parents, sponsors and mentors, and teachers forward.

Buried in the middle of this mini-liturgy is the statement that although they have been enrolled in the class by their parents, the final decision to be confirmed is theirs and theirs alone. I think it is important to tell the truth about both of those elements at the beginning of the year. The eighth graders are, for the most part, not there because it is what they most want to do on Sunday morning, but because their parents have made this choice for them, for their own good, and on their own behalf. But by the time they are ready to be presented to the Bishop, for their promises to have any meaning, they need to be made by the confirmands freely and of their own volition. There is no value of making a promise which you do not understand or which you have no intention of keeping. In either of those cases, it is better to be silent and wait.

One of the great challenges of adolescence, for young people and their parents is negotiating the complicated, difficult, but essential transition from a time when most of the significant decisions about the life of a child are made, and rightly so, by their parents, to the time when many, if not all, significant decisions governing the life of a young person are made by them themselves. Letting children make too many decisions too early, and childish appetites are given too much sway. But when we deny them the opportunity to make decisions for too long, and consequently deny them the ability to evaluate, consider, foresee and weigh outcomes, we deny them the experience necessary to develop good judgment. No one gets this right all the time, but we all strive to be better at it with each opportunity.

Becoming more powerful than the President Learning to make good decisions in the absence of hovering supervision or immediate discovery and subsequent reward or punishment, is a challenge. That ability is essential for a healthy and balanced adult life, but not all adults have acquired this skill. One of the subtexts I have heard in many public statements about our economy and its regulation is a frustration deriving from knowing that restraint of our desire to have as much as we can get is necessary, but that such restraint is virtually impossible to impose by laws, regulations, or other external means. When the government is the only significant authoritative institution left in public life, it is tempting to turn to the government to fix every ill. When government and its tools prove themselves to be unsuited to work essential to our wellbeing as a people, we discover that marginalizing

religious institutions, and scoffing at customs which in earlier generations provided guidance for behavior of individuals and society in general, has proven to be more costly than we anticipated.

The President, the government, no political party or organization can compel us always to do what is right. The formation of our hearts—our character—is beyond their ability. But it is our character which most shapes our individual paths and our collective future as a community, a people, and a nation. And who is dedicating themselves to the formation of strong, thoughtful, generous, and wise character? Indeed, whom would we trust with that great work?

An Academy for Moral Leadership Part of our goal in the confirmation program is to offer something like an academy for moral leadership, an introduction to the criteria for making sound decisions and an early, structured practice in developing a personal methodology for applying those standards. We seek to address the formation of character in the critical time of transition from childhood to young adulthood. We do not start this work with a blank slate; we do not pack it with our own ideas; we do not ask each year's parents what they think we ought to do this year.

We start with the Christian tradition, received through our Anglican tradition, and embodied in the few key elements of the Baptismal Covenant (p. 304 and p. 305 of *The Book of Common Prayer*). This has been our curriculum under Republicans and Democrats, during the ebb and flow of various fashions in education and psychology, and in times of prosperity and in times of economic upheaval. It was the heart of the Confirmation program before I became your rector in 1993, and I trust that it will persist long after someone else has come to occupy this office at St. Elizabeth's. The Baptismal Covenant is the core of our beliefs as adults as well as the heart of our Confirmation program. We all reaffirm these beliefs, values, and behavioral norms at every baptism.

Learning to seek and serve Christ in **all** persons, and learning what it means to seek justice and peace for **all** people is as important as anything else our eighth graders learn this year in any setting—in their weekday classes, on the playing fields, or anywhere else. I think we get in, and make, more trouble from inadequate moral development than from mediocre academic performance lackluster athletic achievement in the eighth grade. So as you consider how you allocate your time and attention for your child's education, in the eighth grade or any other year, ask if your resource allocation corresponds to the priorities of what will actually determine the quality of the life of your child and the character of the culture they will shape when they become adults. And perhaps apply that same question to yourselves as adults.

Getting what we actually desire Generosity, graciousness, moral courage, self discipline, a sense of purpose, and an empathetic nature are learned, not innate, characteristics, and they are learned more thoroughly and effectively if we have a conscious strategy. We don't expect children to pick up a foreign language, mathematics, or history by osmosis, by a one-year intensive program, or because their parents believe that these subjects matter. We expect, and practice, intentional, day-in-and-day-out work. And we do that because we have faith that not only familiarity but mastery of these subjects are essential for a full life.

I propose that we give at least the same priority to what, if we think about it, we actually believe matters even more than academic or athletic skills. The lives of some of our most distinguished athletes suggest that any link between high performance and moral development is, at best, fairly tenuous. (The only surprise is that the misbehavior of professional athletes continues to be considered newsworthy.) We have also seen people with great intellectual abilities and prestigious educations make choices which have served, at best, only themselves and often at great cost to others. Education and sports, by themselves, just do not produce the lives we want our children to have, or that we want for ourselves.

One of my hopes is that young people who grow up at St. Elizabeth's and who commit to participating in our confirmation program will internalize the values of the baptismal covenant—values of inclusion, self-awareness, peace, justice, faithful practices, and confidence in a sense of God's love for and presence with them. Confession as a means to get a fresh start will be familiar to them. Justice and peace will not be owned by any political party or be defined by pundits or philosophers but will be understood as core values defined by God and applicable to all people.

Bestowing the gift of speech... But I have another hope which is related to the questions I ask the Confirmands at the beginning of the year, and will also be related to the questions the Bishop will ask them when they stand before him. I hope that our young people will learn not only a reliable, Christian basis for making decisions, but will also develop the confidence to speak, and speak clearly, boldly, and, if need be, alone, for what they know to be right and to denounce what they know to be wrong. My hope is that when the time comes, as it surely will, they will have the clarity of vision and the fortitude of spirit to say "That is wrong." "I am against this." "I will have no part in this, and neither should you." Or, "That is exactly right." "She or he has said something to which we need to pay attention." "This is how we should go forward."

When our children are presented, as they surely will be, with an invitation which is popular, attractive, and dangerous and destructive, my hope is that they will have been equipped at home, at Church, and in the community, to be able to see the danger and be confident in simply saying, "no". Or when they see a person or group of low status being ridiculed or marginalized, they will be the first on their feet to say that we can and should do better.

...and finding our voice Church is a place where, in a supportive environment, our young people—and all of us—can develop the ability to say clearly, publicly, and with inspiring confidence, "I will, with God's help." "I renounce them." "I do." and "We will." When we become practiced at saying this here, then saying it outside of Church will not be so hard.

So maybe this year's Confirmation Class will mumble when they come forward on Opening Sunday—or maybe they will surprise me and speak with confidence and strength. But whatever they do this month, I hope they—and all of the rest of us—will be on the path to knowing when to say "no" and when to say "yes" and having the courage to do so. When we continue in the apostles, teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers, I believe we will, with God's help.

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