

Praying for God
Sunday, June 11, 2006
The First Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis
Isaiah 6:1-8
Romans 8:12-17

Whom can I ask what I came
to make happen in this world?

Why do I move without wanting to,
why am I not able to sit still?

What did the tree learn from the earth
to be able to talk with the sky?

These questions are lines of poetry from one of my favorite books, “The Book of Questions” by the great Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda. On this confirmation Sunday, a Sunday when we celebrate the presence and spiritual lives of our children and youth, what better day to ask questions?

The confirmation process itself is meant to be an examination of questions. In some of the traditional confirmation processes, the whole content is structured around questions regarding the catechism. In our confirmation process, the whole structure is around creating an environment of questioning and exploration. Today is an accumulation of understanding those questions, a pinnacle in the journey when our youth can pause and affirm what understanding has been gained, knowing all the while that what has been achieved is merely a broader plateau from which to ask more questions.

Whom can we ask what we came to make happen in this world? Seeking the answer to this question is what fills a majority of seats in religious institutions of all faiths, but it is also what, at its core, the confirmation process is all about. Who can we ask our questions to? What do we have to offer the world?

In the confirmation process here at First Presbyterian Church we approach these questions through a variety of topics that are meant to be an overview of the major components of our faith. Through exploration of subjects that include the sacraments, the Bible, the history and structure of Presbyterianism, the youth have an opportunity to ask whatever questions they have.

This year’s class tackled a number of important questions; questions about the formation and languages of the Bible, questions about infant versus adult baptism, questions about sin and what separates us from God, questions about what it means to be part of a community of faith, in particular a Presbyterian community of faith. Melanie, David, Scott, Chloe, and Lily approached this process with energy and a fair amount of doubts, and I believe some nervousness initially about what they would encounter. I would hope for nothing less.

Confirmation is, after all, one of the most challenging ways to join the church; even though the process is steeped in our history and many of you sitting here today I’m sure have memories of your own confirmation process. But of the formal ways we

welcome people into the community – baptism of infants, inquirer’s classes for adults, confirmation is the most intense in terms of time and the most difficult in terms of stage of life. As infants, we know little of what is happening, and the promises made are commitments by those around us to nurture and help us grow with an understanding of faith. As adults who attend the inquirer’s class we are aware that we are seeking something for ourselves. Often it is something practical, a warm welcoming place to affirm our relationships, a place to start and nurture a family, a place where we are welcome when the world has not been so open to us, a place to be known and make new friends who share our core values.

As youth, though, we are often thrust into a process that feels very alien. Our parents have a huge impact on our participation in confirmation and while we love them, we are also trying to figure out how to be our own people, so we aren’t too sure doing what they say is the right way to go. We are exhausted with the emotional transitions of our bodies and our brains as teenagers, and the sleep we so desperately want on Sunday mornings is more real than it might seem. And frankly, authority figures of any kind are suspect – be they parents, teachers, coaches, or religious leaders.

Therefore, confirmation, more than any other period in our faith development, must be able to absorb our doubts, hear our questions, and present us with enough of foundation that we can begin to be able to articulate something of our own beliefs, even if it begins in the language of our ancestors and then transforms into our own words. At the end of the day, there must be something we are willing to stand in front of people and CONFIRM.

What is confirmed is not an answer to the question, whom can I ask what I came to make happen in this world? What is confirmed is a way to seek the answer to that question through our faith. The wonderful thing about confirmation Sunday is that it is time to let there be a settling of the questions, an accumulation of what has been sought so far. This is true not just for the confirmands but for all of us today. When we baptize young children or adults, we are encouraged to remember our own baptism. Confirmation also encourages us to remember our journeys to this point, and to confirm also where our seeking has brought us today. Without these markers to pause at and reflect and consider again whom can I ask what I came to make happen in this world? It is easy to feel as if we only wander from question to question and never find the grounding our questions bring to us.

Implicit in the first of Neruda’s questions is a sense that we are indeed called to respond to the world. In confirmation we affirm a sense of that call as something related to our faith. Isaiah’s call in the Temple is one of the classic biblical texts about call, and is preached about at countless ordinations each year. In the framework of asking questions and responding by confirming our faith, it is an excellent passage to consider today.

The drama of this passage begins in the opening clause and builds to a fiery and smoky climax. It begins in a clear transition, “in the year that Uzziah died...” In this tumult of leadership transition in Judah, it is Isaiah who we accompany to the temple, through whose eyes we witness a holiness that even when described is beyond the scope of our imaginations. It is like trying to take a photograph of a beautiful landscape, so much is lost in the transition from what our eyes see to what the photograph captures.

Isaiah is brought face to face with a power that is more powerful than any earthly thing, among the wings of the cherubim and through the smoke and fire, and stepping toward the hem of this royal robe, Isaiah is in the midst of his own accelerated confirmation process. And when the question is asked, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah, drenched in awe and with no community around him from which to democratically decide who would go, loosens his feet from the paralysis of the moment, steps forward and confirms “Send me.”

I can't help but wonder if later that night it wasn't Neruda's second question that was going through Isaiah's mind: why do I move without wanting to, why am I not able to sit still? The ability to sit still has become a marker of maturity for those younger than eighteen. I ask all of you children and youth sitting here in worship how many times this week – or even this morning - have your parents and teachers have asked you to sit still? Five times? Ten times?

Some of you may already be really good at sitting still, others of you, I know, including some in this year's confirmation class would not consider sitting still to be all that easy or important. Good news for you, when the question is asked, Whom shall I send? You may very well be at the front of the line, and this is not solely because you are not able to sit still. It is more likely because you understand something about putting things into action. And while that can be distracting for reading, writing, arithmetic, and even confirmation class, it is surely helpful in other ways, like responding to those in need, and responding to a call that others may hesitate to act upon.

The busyness of everyday lives, lead many to seek ways to be still. Especially as an adult I have talked with many of you are seeking a peacefulness, a stillness that is difficult to locate. I have found that I was much better at sitting still when I younger than I am now; perhaps because I so wanted to please those adults around me and not cause too much trouble, I could sit still in school, I could sit still in church with an amazing competence. As an adult, though, I can't seem to sit still at all. Even when I am watching television, I am usually doing something else also, and am always bouncing up from whatever I am doing because I thought of something else that urgently needs to be done. It has only been recently that I feel like I am relearning what it means to sit still.

Balance is the important piece of this question: why do I move without wanting to, why am I not able to sit still? There is no doubt that this question leads those who seek stillness toward finding that place; but it also implies that in finding those still points, we might then move because we WANT to, and that movement will have some focus. It is not a question that leads us away from movement, but to a different kind of movement. Again, this day is a moment of pausing, a moment of stillness to realize where we have been and to gather our strength to respond to that which we have committed. The process of confirmation is really just beginning.

There is one further thing about story of Isaiah witnessing God in the Temple that is disarming, and that is the fact that God's holiness is so profound and awe-inspiring that God can seem only distant and other. In fact is it the very holiness and otherness of God that connects us more firmly; after all, God needs something, like us humans, to be other than. In this, God seeks us out as much as we seek God out. That connectedness draws us into the final question that we investigate today: what did the tree learn from the earth to be able to talk with the sky? This question parallels the question our children's choir

asked today in their anthem: How can I keep from singing? These questions are the embodiment of our connectedness to each other and to God.

It is our connectedness to God and to each other that give us the best answers to the first two questions we have asked today. Whom can I ask what I came to make happen in the world? Why do I move without wanting to, why am I not able to sit still? In our connectedness to God, we have a tendency to perceive God as other but to forget about the holiness that should accompany that otherness, or God becomes too much like us in her failures to solve the world's problems, to get us a new bike, to heal the sick in the way that we desire, to provide clarity for impossible decisions.

This past March, Faye Timmer and I led a special workshop about prayer for children in Kindergarten through 6th grade. We met during the church school hour and with the help of our church school teachers and parents, groups of children worked at six different stations to create lists of prayers for certain categories. Prayers for ourselves, prayers for the world, things we are afraid of, things we are thankful for, and so forth. You have heard some of these petitions in our children's prayers this morning and throughout the spring.

On one list, "Prayers for others in our world" Faye and I came across an interesting petition. Under people who had been hurt by hurricanes, and people who are sick, was a simple two word prayer request, "for God." It was so stunningly beautiful to Faye and me that we talked about it for quite a while, and ultimately it became the title of today's sermon. We talk and pray so often TO God, we are witnessed to by an important voice today that reminds us of a deep empathy, for our God, that we can pray FOR God and not just TO God. Like the question musician Joan Osborne raised to popularity years ago, "What if God was one of us?", this question, what does it mean to pray FOR God instead of TO God, demands that we see our faith from a new perspective.

A God that we pray FOR is perhaps more like one of us, and much less other; but praying FOR God also demands a connectedness and a shared responsibility that may motivate us beyond what we thought was possible. Praying for God is like moving out of our stillness and responding "send me." It is an affirmation of our need to affirm that we are indeed here to make something happen in the world.

For it is in our connectedness to God and each other, that we are able to ask our questions, share our doubts, and witness most fully to the spirit that leads us to sing, and dance and praise. Essentially, our connectedness confirms our faith; our questions illustrate our joy in that connectedness. In praying for God, we learn just a little of what the tree learned from the earth to be able to talk with the sky.

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