

WPC

Rev. Ken Sunoo

May 2, 2010 – Confirmation of Ivy Beck, Conor Eckert, Mason Friedline, & Rebecca Sunoo

Further Up and Further In
Romans 8:31-39

What an exciting day it is in the life of Wallingford Presbyterian Church. I've worked with a number of confirmation classes since I was ordained to the ministry 17 years ago, and they've all been wonderful. But this year's confirmation class is the first one I've worked with where I've known all of the confirmands since they were toddlers. When our family moved here to Seattle back in 1998, Rebecca, who was 3 years old at the time, was warmly welcomed by the other 3 year olds in this church.

It's been fun to see them grow up together and to see them all make a commitment to active membership in our church. I've enjoyed working with the confirmands, and I've learned as much from them, from their questions and struggles and challenges, as I hope they learned from this program.

Today's message is intended for the whole congregation, but it's particularly directed to our 4 confirmands today.

In The Last Battle, C.S. Lewis' last book in his Chronicles of Narnia, there's a scene where the people of Aslan the Lion leave old Narnia for the new Narnia. Lewis describes it as going "further up and further in." The new Narnia is like the old Narnia, only deeper: "every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more....The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this" (p. 171). As they go further up and further in, they get closer and closer to God and to ultimate reality.

"Further up and further in" has been the motto for this year's confirmation class, dubbed "The God Squad." We've been trying to go deeper in our faith in order to become closer to God. So we've memorized a whole host of things and learned about how the Presbyterian Church operates. But more importantly, we've tried to see what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ, to live out our faith in both word and action. And now we've arrived at this day of confirmation, when you've made public promises to become official members of this church.

Tom Long once shared a story about how they did confirmation Sunday at his friend's church. They take all the teenagers of a certain age, and for a number of weeks they put them through confirmation education. And then on Pentecost Sunday, they bring all the confirmands into the

church and they line them up in front of the sanctuary and the kids get to show off a little bit of what they've learned.

Sometimes, they've memorized the Creed, sometimes they've learned a little church history. On this particular Sunday, they had memorized a passage of scripture. In fact, it was the part of Romans 8 that was just read this morning. And the teacher asked them to share with the congregation what they learned.

"George," he said, starting with the first kid on this end of the line, "what shall separate you from the love of God?"

And George said, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." George beamed, his parents beamed, the congregation beamed. And the teacher moved to the next student, "Mary, what can separate you from the love of God?" And she recited Romans 8.

But, as the question moved down the line, the congregation grew anxious. Because at the end of the line was Rachel, a child of warm smile and easy grace, but a Down Syndrome child. There was no way she could

memorize Romans 8, could she? But, the question moved closer until, “Rachel, what can separate you from the love of God?”

Rachel flashed that familiar smile and then she said but one word, “Nothing...” And of course, that said it all.

This year during Confirmation we’ve learned about such things as the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the books of the Bible, the Apostle’s Creed, the Reformation, and the Presbyterian Church. We talked about how justification means God acting on our behalf to restore us to a right relationship with him, and how sanctification means God’s continuing work in us – God’s grace, though free, is not cheap and requires a response from us.

But Ivy, Conor, Mason, and Rebecca, if there’s one thing I pray that you never forget from this year, it’s that nothing...nothing...NOTHING can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. When it comes right down to it, that’s the most important thing you need to remember.

Certainly doubt can never separate you from the love of God. We’ve talked a lot this year about having the freedom to question everything, because if God is truly God, he can handle our questions and doubts. We

don't have to worry about protecting God – God can take care of himself. Faith doesn't mean you have all the answers, or that you're certain of everything. "Faith is giving as much of yourself as you know to as much of Christ as you know" (Sam Shoemaker).

We don't have all the answers; we don't know everything. And chances are pretty good we'll continue to have our doubts along our respective journeys of faith. Frederick Buechner says, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." What's important is what we do with our doubts. Don't go solo. Stay with the community of faith, the church, who can walk with you when you have questions about your faith. Wherever you go, find the people of faith and stick with them.

If doubt cannot separate you from the love of God, then neither can failure. When we join the church, we say that we will be Christ's faithful disciple and a faithful member of this congregation, WITH GOD'S HELP. I have every confidence in your abilities to be faithful disciples – simply continue doing what you've been doing all along as members of the God Squad. What you've promised to do is to give your best effort in following God. But if there are times when you feel you've failed to be a faithful disciple, when you feel you've forgotten the promises you made, remember

that God will never abandon you. God is always ready to forgive and to heal. All you have to do is ask.

I say this because it's important for you to hear, but honestly, I don't have a whole lot of fear of failure for this group. Those of you in the congregation who've had the pleasure and privilege of working and playing with these 4 young disciples already know this, but I'll say it anyway: they are an amazing gift of God to this church.

Confirmands, we are blessed to have you with us, and the church of Jesus Christ will continue to be blessed by your presence wherever you go from here. Stick with the church for your own sakes, and for ours, too. And continue to go further up and further in as you progress on your journey of faith.

If God is for us, who can be against us? That's the good news – that God is indeed for us, that God loves us, and that nothing, NOTHING can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That's a good word for this Confirmation Class, and it's a good word for the rest of us, as well. Amen.