

## Reflections for Easter 5, 2021 (May 2)

Last Sunday we celebrated the Affirmation of Baptism—Confirmation. Normally our 9<sup>th</sup> graders are confirmed on Reformation Day, the last Sunday in October; but due to the COVID shut-down we had to postpone it. I don't get involved with the kids until the last couple of months before they're confirmed, usually the beginning of the school year. I have maybe 10-12 hours to get to know them, and to impart to them a pastor's perspective on scripture, faith, and life beyond Confirmation.

In 22 years of ordained ministry I've confirmed hundreds of kids! The largest class (in Green Bay) was 56; the smallest was 2. A lot has changed since 2000. Social and cultural and family values; expectations; education. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8)—but not much else remains unchanged.

When I was confirmed at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade (San Marino Presbyterian Church, California) it meant nothing at all to me except a party. We went to my favorite restaurant for lunch: Bob's Big Boy in Pasadena, where my mother, sister, and I could get hamburgers, fries, and a silver goblet milkshake for \$5.00. That's \$5 for *all* of us. Including tip.

I continued to attend church because my mother made me. Since they had a *very* good children's choir I didn't object too much. The choir sat in front of the congregation, facing them. We passed notes, ate cough drops, giggled a lot during most of the service; but the "pastoral prayer" was a time we had to be silent. I don't know if it was just our minister or if all Presbyterians back then prayed loooong prayers. Longer than the sermon!!

When I graduated from high school, my mom and I moved to Redlands, where I attended the university and majored in German. Since I was living in the dorm, not under her roof, I no longer had to go to church, so I didn't. Redlands was a Baptist school, and we had required "chapel" every Tuesday. The chaplain was a wonderful man of deep faith (which I still didn't have), but I remember only one of the services. There was always talking and passing things around, but one day the noise was so loud that in the middle of the Lord's Prayer, Mr. Graham stopped talking and walked out. It was sort of scary; nobody knew what to do. Eventually we all got up quietly—silently!—and left. – That is THE highlight of my faith journey during my college years!

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My first post-grad year was spent in Berlin, Germany. I lived with a war widow on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of an old apartment building (no elevator); my room looked out on the Spree River, where swans remained even during that brutal winter (that was the first time I ever saw snow!) On Sunday mornings I could hear church bells from multiple churches in the area, and I still thrill to that sound when the 2 bells at St. John are rung!

After a couple of months there, I began attending a “Lutheran” church nearby. The liturgy was the same, and I loved singing the hymns in German, but the only “comfort” I felt was the music. When I returned to the U.S. the following summer I spent only 3 weeks with family in California before moving to Baltimore, where I spent 2 years earning my first Master’s degree (in German). It took only a week at Johns Hopkins for me to completely crash emotionally. The culture shock of leaving Germany and being “home” where everything was different, then moving again, caught up with me.

I was in trouble, and I desperately needed help. And *then* I remembered God! I remembered the Confirmation verse my pastor had chosen for me, Psalm 27:1, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid.” I remembered the deep faith of my Grandpa (maternal), who was a dedicated and faithful Christian Scientist, and of my Grandma (maternal), who was a staunch Roman Catholic. I remembered that my mother had begun attending church regularly so that I would grow up exposed to things of faith. And I was incredibly thankful that she had insisted on my attending church all those years. Because if I hadn’t known how “important” God was, and how meaningful faith had been for my family, I never would have known to come back to church myself.

So I don’t worry too much about the lack of interest most of our kids have in Confirmation. The seeds of faith have been planted, the families continue to worship faithfully, and when they realize how much they need God in their lives, God will be ready to welcome them back. After all, God will never have left them. Jesus’ last words to his disciples were, “Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

Thanks be to God!