

May 6, 2018, Confirmation Sunday
10:30 a.m.



YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

the Rev. Dr. Paula Northwood
Acting Senior Minister

PLYMOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

1900 Nicollet Ave.
Minneapolis, MN 55403
www.plymouth.org

Text: Proverbs 22, selections

When I was young, I thought the entire United States of America was laid out in square-mile (paved) grids, because in northwestern Ohio that's how it was. I never got lost because four rights turns always brought you back to where you started—it all made perfect sense. Then I moved to southern Michigan, where it's hilly with lots of lakes. I lived and worked at a camp while I studied at a seminary in northern Indiana. Once I tried a different route home using the assumption of the Ohio grid. I ran into a dead end because of a lake. I tried another road. Dead end. I tried another road. Dead end. This was before GPS and Google Maps. I was getting frustrated when I saw a person walking down the road. I slowed down and asked how to get to the camp where I lived. He said, "Sorry, ma'am, but you can't get there from here." What do you mean you can't get there from here? I was incredulous. He just shrugged his shoulders and said, "You have to go a different way." Was I lost? Not really. I knew I was in Michigan. Did I know where I was? No. I didn't.

I don't know if you realize, but that's what the year of Confirmation is like. For Confirmation students, you have grown up in a family that has brought you to church. You attended church school and worship. You have heard the stories from the Bible. Maybe you have participated in Third Sunday meal or a Habitat build or another kind of service project. You might think you know what this religion thing is all about. You understand the grid. You've made assumptions. You likely believed what your parents believed. Then your brain started developing and you could think your own thoughts and suddenly some of those things didn't make sense. I mean Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy all turned out to be fairy tales . . . so maybe this religion stuff is like that, too.

During Confirmation class, we invite you to explore thinking in a new way. You may now realize you can't get there from here. You can't keep on thinking the same way. You have to find your own way. You have to find a different way. Your youthful ways of thinking about God, Jesus and spiritual things aren't sufficient. You need a new map.

I don't know if you have ever noticed how much the people of God are travelers. After the creation stories in Genesis, God asks Abraham and Sarah to go on a journey to a new land. They get into all kinds of predicaments where they are told, "You can't get there from here," and they have to try a different approach. In Exodus, we have the people of Israel enslaved and in exile. When they are freed from Egyptian rule and set out toward the Promised Land, the people spend forty years trying to find the way, trying to figure it out, and they did . . . eventually.

In the Christian scriptures, Jesus encountered a young man who told him "I love God and follow the commandments but something seems to be missing." Jesus told him, "You need to sell everything you own and give it to the poor." The young man went away sad because he was very rich. But we don't know the end of that story. Maybe after some thought he realized that Jesus was right. Money wasn't going to get

him where he wanted to go. Many of our Bible stories are about people who are lost, stuck in some personal problem, or oppressed by the government and unable to find the way because of fear, or hate, or skepticism.

God doesn't magically teleport us through a journey of faith. It doesn't work that way. The journey isn't a onetime decision. It's a lifelong journey where you make a million decisions and God promises to go with us even when we get lost. Albert Einstein said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." It's the same with faith. You can't figure out a plan for going forward by using childlike thinking. This year, you have started thinking and asking the hard questions of adulthood. You have started a new journey.

So what would it take to get there from here? What lessons need to be learned, what habits need to be let go, what perspectives need to shift, what tools do we need? Sometimes it's easier to stay lost or stuck than it is to figure out what you need to do to get further along the road . . . to go deeper into or on the journey. It becomes easier to stay an agnostic or atheist or apathetic because it takes great risk to explore the ineffable mystery of the sacred. Some people stay stuck their whole lives because they do not want to risk a journey of faith.

Even when we are stuck, lost or afraid, we are promised that God will find us. There is no place so desolate that God cannot restore. No injustice so egregious that God cannot grant forgiveness. God's unfolding in the person of Jesus demonstrated to us that there is a possibility for change, real change, big systemic and structural change, not like changing a flat tire, but the creation of a divine highway that gets us all the way home.

My prayer is that you will be open to asking for directions. In some ways, that is what the church is all about. Together we are exploring new ways to "get there." Every Sunday, we read the sacred map together. This community gathered made a covenant with you when you were baptized that they would help nurture your spirit. Take them up on it. There is a great deal of wisdom in this room.

It has been a privilege for me to spend this church year with the Confirmands in a more intentional way. Some of you I have known since you were born. I even baptized you or was present for your baptism. I have enjoyed getting to know you better, and my life is richer because of it. I always learn something by listening to your questions. A few of you have reminded me that church and religion are just not that interesting right now, or that it is difficult to give them attention because you have so much going on. I understand, but when the time is right, turn around and find a new way. Allow your life to be transformed. Be open to taking a sacred road into wisdom and wholeness.

I have been talking mostly to the Confirmands, but right now we as a church stand at a fork in the road, and it's okay to stay here for a while as we get our bearings. Soon we will start an adventure, and I hope everyone—especially the Confirmands—will be willing to participate! We need everyone because Plymouth Church is made up of all its members. We need everyone! May it be so. Amen.

2018 Confirmation Statement of Faith Excerpts

Please note that these sentences are only portions of the students' Statement of Faith papers.

My Grandpa Keith and I were, for first time that I remember, having a real conversation and it was about religion. I told him I wasn't sure about being in confirmation because science makes so much more sense to me. He listened, and then he told me, "Religion is why, science is how." This will stick with me forever.

John Bottemiller

I am not totally sure what the Holy Spirit is. I think that it is there, and at times of struggle people can feel it with them. I do think that at times in my life I have felt the Holy Spirit. At these times when I was depressed or having a very hard time, like after my dog died and I was really sad all the time, I did feel something there. I do think that you can see the Holy Spirit in people. For example, if someone does something very heroic, I think that could be the Holy Spirit.

Sara Burch

I don't think that there is an afterlife, because it is not physically possible (what do we know about physically possible—maybe there are actually four dimensions?), but physical is all anyone knows. Unless there truly is a God and God truly controls everything, there is no afterlife. I hope there is an afterlife, though, because that would be really cool.

Spencer Bubula

I guess what I'm saying is that I do believe in something greater than what we can easily comprehend, but maybe "God" wouldn't be my first choice to describe it. I think it makes more sense just to refer to it as "The Universe." I believe that everything we do shapes The Universe and everything that happens in The Universe shapes us. I think of the Holy Spirit as a force that has an amazing ability to unite. It is something that brings many Christians together. It is a force that is good and does good in the world. It builds a community among Christians and it is all around us.

Gina Cassellius

I believe the Holy Spirit is the connection that I have with my friends and family. I feel a sense of belonging and comfort when I am surrounded by my friends or surrounded by my family. I believe that this belonging and comfort is God taking care of me and looking out for me.

Anna Christensen

Is there a God? In all reality, probably not. Even if there is a God, I wouldn't worship him. Rather, I will live my life as a good and moral person, citizen and friend, because I imagine that will be enough for him. It certainly is for me.

Ellis Durand

I believe there is a God, yet sometimes I wonder if he still believes in us. I am choosing to join Plymouth Congregational Church. I want to become a member because I want to feel I am a part of a big community where I can be myself and feel like I belong and where I am not just a visitor. I think there are many benefits of a faith community. When you are a part of a faith community, you feel you are a part of something bigger than yourself and you can worship with people who believe in the same things you do. The people in your church may become a second family and that is something everyone should have. Through song, prayer or sermons, you can share the joy of feeling that bond with others, and I think that's a huge part of my own life.

Hannah Faeth

I believe God is the idea of the universe working for you. I was watching a Superwoman video and she said, "No matter what you are going through, it will be okay." This is how I see God. Even if you don't know what

is going to happen or if you have had a bad day, God is the fact that it is going to be okay. God is history, kind of. God shapes how outside forces play out to ensure you that it will work out—you will be fine. I think that everyone is treated the same by God. God is a name for the force of good in the world.

Emma Hazen-Disch

Religion is about finding yourself, finding something to believe in to ground you. It's also about finding others who share your beliefs, so that we have a sense of belonging. In a place like Plymouth, we are united by our grounding, but free to drift through the air. We bring so many beliefs, opinions and thoughts together in our community. We are united by ideas, yet diverse in ideas. But no matter what ideas you bring and why you're here, there's still a seat at the table.

Griffin Moore

I would assume that Jesus was probably a political radical. He went against the established majority, and as a result, had some followers and some people who wanted him gone. I believe that if anything, he could have been a teacher and a healer, but in a much more realistic way than the Bible may say.

Alison Nordhougen Melloh

What matters is what we know, and how we can use that information to better our own and others' lives. The more time we spend searching for answers that we may never find, the less we will have for what's really important: family, friends, happiness, peace and a better world. Religion can show us the way to a more fulfilled, happy life. It encourages each individual to find meaning and something that they love. *That's* the importance of religion to me. It's what makes me think of myself as an Agnostic-Theist, someone who respects religion, but doesn't adhere to it.

Henry Nomeland

God is a motivating idea that people created in order to help pull out their inner selves. This idea becomes a spirit that comforts and inspires people. God is manmade, but it becomes bigger than an idea when people believe in it. God is within people. God helps me to connect with my inner being. God helps me to be honest with myself and face hard truths. God shapes history but doesn't make history.

Ella Syring

I understand God to be the goodness, love and connection between people. To me, God and the Holy Spirit are different interpretations of the same thing. People believe God to be different things, and I think everyone has their own version of God, whether it be morals and ethics or another spiritual deity within them. I believe God can help inspire those who want change to take action and face adversity to revise society for the better. My relationship with God defines what I see as my purpose or duty to the world.

Sanna Walker

I think Jesus represents three things. I believe He was a historical person. He was a teacher. And He was a political radical. He was a historical person because He was a real person in history. He was a teacher because He taught a new religious philosophy that later became Christianity. And he was a political radical because, at that time, Christianity was not a thing and most people believed in Roman mythology.

Magnus Wuolo-Journey

I believe that the Big Bang had some kind of dynamic energy in it that was filled with kindness and love—and that energy was God. While I believe in evolution and that we were created by evolution, I also believe there is a fireball of energy inside each human, full of love, grace and all the good qualities that humans possess. I believe that God blessed us with these traits, but we have the will and the power to show them—by volunteering, by showing kindness to our classmates or co-workers, or by fighting for something we believe in. Humans were put on the Earth to make it a better place.

Phoebe Zamoff