



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Built on the Right Foundation
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

June 1, 2008
Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
Matthew 7:21-29

It seems fitting that on this day when our 13 confirmation students are baptized or confirmed that we would get to hear from the final verses of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Confirmation Class here, especially with our use of mentors, enables our young people to look over the shoulder of a mature Christian and to see what a life of faith looks like.

As I mentioned in last week's sermon, Jesus is doing the same thing in his Sermon on the Mount. He is talking to his disciples, and the crowds are also there, listening in behind them. The whole sermon is a collection of teachings on different things that Jesus wants his disciples to know. It's really about what a disciple's life lived under the reign of God looks like. In other words, Jesus is exploring what a faithful disciple looks like—how they think and act, what priorities they set, and what behaviors mark a disciple's life. And, as he often does, Jesus doesn't simply list a set of rules or bullet-points to be strictly adhered to, but rather he prods the imaginations of his hearers by asking questions about life without giving direct answers or by holding up scenarios or choices for his hearers to consider. Jesus is always—especially in his Sermon on the Mount—trying to get his hearers to stop and consider the choices before them, and in doing so, to shape their lives according to the ways of the kingdom.

I say it's particularly fitting that today we were able to listen to the final words from the Sermon on the Mount because in these final words, Jesus is warning those who have heard the Sermon—the disciples and the crowds, but also the readers of Matthew's Gospel—that they must not listen to Jesus' words and then just forget them, or even listen to Jesus' words and simply cherish them as keys to the good life, but they must put Jesus' words into action. The same is true for these 13 students who have completed all the requirements of this year's confirmation class. They have met faithfully with their mentors and have shared in discussing their lessons on the various components of the life of faith. They have written statements of faith which they shared with the Session when they were examined at the end of their classes together. They have met as a group to talk about the Trinity and Worship and Death and Resurrection. They have done service together and played together. So today, on this glorious Confirmation Sunday, we join them in celebration as they are baptized into or confirmed in their faith.

But, just as Jesus warns at the end of his Sermon on the Mount, all that they learned cannot simply be seen as a hoop to jump through, as if checking of the membership requirement to-do list was enough. No, this is about much more than just becoming members of the church. This is about being claimed in the waters of baptism and living a life as one marked by the sign of the Cross. The process of confirmation is not about learning the right things so that you can join the church nearly as much as it is about coming to the

understanding that your life should change because of the gospel's claims upon you.

And, what makes this particularly important today is that saying that about these 13 young people who have come to publicly profess their faith in Jesus Christ allows us all—even those who were confirmed decades ago—to stop and consider whether we have remembered and acted on Jesus' words in our whole lives, or whether we have simply done enough to be decent members of a congregation.

There is, you see, a huge difference between membership and discipleship. That's one of the shifts that is finally taking place in the church today. No longer do we simply want folks to be good, upstanding members of a congregation, as if that were ever enough. No, we want all of us who live out our faith in the midst of this congregation to be so consumed by the gospel that it shapes what we do at work or in the home or in the neighborhood or on I-81 or anywhere else that we find ourselves. It is to stop and consider what our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ means for our living.

Many years ago I got a window into that sort of commitment. It happened in a confirmation class—though not this one. During the session exam, we had been divided into examination teams, with groups of about 3-4 elders meeting with 1 or 2 confirmation students. Someone asked one of the confirmands in the group I was assigned to what they were most looking forward to as a new disciple.

I vividly remember her response, and I hope she remembers it as well: "I am looking forward to the day when I can be more committed to God and to the church than my parents have been."

Now I want you to know that she wasn't just complaining about her parents or being overly-critical of anything her elders were doing. She was simply reflecting on what might be an exciting part of her future life in Christ, but in doing so, all of us had to consider our own commitment to Christ and his Church.

You know what I think she was doing in that answer? She was telling us that she was going to build her life on the words of Christ who had claimed her in the waters of baptism. When Jesus holds up the image of a house built on the sand compared to one built on the solid rock, he is inviting us to consider whether our lives are built on the right foundation. And that question isn't just directed to these 13 students who will soon be before us in confirmation but to all of us who have heard the words of Jesus.

The consuming words that Jesus speaks—the words that give life but that also turn our worlds upside down—are not simply to be heard; they are to be lived. And they aren't simply to be lived here safely within the walls of the church but also in the world.

Jesus' sermon is ended—as is this year's Confirmation Class. We readers of Matthew's Gospel must follow Jesus as he makes his way down the mountain, and our confirmands will make their way into their post-confirmation lives. Together, we will go on the rest of the story to see if the astonishment of the crowds—and our own amazement—at the words of Jesus will be transformed into true discipleship.

What I hope and pray for these confirmands is really my prayer for all who have words of Jesus—that we will build our lives on the words of Jesus who leads us into life.