

Peter Wiley
I Corinthians 13:8-13
Hudson – Confirmation
5-18-08

Today we confirm 22 of the young men and women of our congregation. Last September I told them (you) that just two things need to happen for them to become members of the church. First, they need to be able to make the simple confession that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior. Second, they need to know what that means. They need to know what that means, not to others, but for them. And that's why we ask them to write a personal statement of faith. I tell them that I have little interest in how well they can tell me what other people believe . . . I want to know about their faith. Please, I tell them, don't recite creeds of old or orthodox theology or statements about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – just tell us three things in your own words about what *you* believe:

1. Who or what is God?
2. What does that say about the world around you?
3. What does God want from you?

And over the years of some 3-400 confirmands, what I've received in return is a wonderful mix of pointedly honest confessions, declarations, and sharings of their view of the world and themselves. How they fit in and how they don't. Their joys and their struggles. Their sense of reality in that particular moment in time. Some are less than a dozen words, others three and four pages long. Some are filled with the simplicity of a faith of trust, others are filled with complex nuance and long pondered reflection. They're built on certainties, on doubt and on a faith shared with them by those they love.

One of our confirmands this year quotes his grandmother's favorite saying . . . a reminder to him that God is ever present watching over him. Another offers a deep faith that God is over, in and behind everything that is. While another acknowledges that while she really does believe in God she also has to contend with doubts. All of you (them) did a great job in offering where your faith is today. I hope it will be just the first among many statements you make for yourselves over the years.

This morning's scripture tells of Paul's own growth in faith, from that which wasn't simple, but simplistic, to a faith rich and deep in texture.

SCRIPTURE: Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophecy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

SERMON: When I was a child I had a simple faith. As the years passed, I lost that faith. Then, in time, I got faith again. As a child I thought in simple terms – black & white, right & wrong, good & bad. There was a wonderful clarity in the simplicity. Rules were rules. Do good and follow the law and there was a just and fair reward. Fail to live up to the rules and there were consequences – some of them quite dire . . . and within the faith, some eternal.

That's what I thought as a child. That's what I had learned in church. Then life got in the way. The faith I'd been taught didn't match what I saw in the world or learned in school. The God of my childhood was a flat judge, without depth or texture or understanding. But my life said something different. My life showed me understanding and love. Church had shown me a dark world of gloom. But everything I saw around me was colorful and contoured. In church I learned to fear making a mistake. Saying the wrong words. Dropping a communion cup (I only did that once, but it sure caused me a lot of angst). I didn't want a God like that. And my life didn't match that image either – and as a child I lost that faith.

But then I started listening more closely to the pastor of my church. And that wasn't his image of God either. He talked of a God of beauty and great expanse. A God who searched for me every time I strayed. A God who looked to love instead of hate. A God wanted more than anything, for us to be whole and fulfilled. I liked that. And I began to listen to a whole host of voices of people of faith who knew a God of embrace – and I got faith again. And that's the faith I hold to this day.

What's the faith you hold today?

I can tell you a little about mine . . .

The faith I cling to tells me of

- A God of questions, not answers.
- A God who's forward thinking not backward stuck.
- A God who can't be reduced to a power-point presentation

Because God is too big for that. The God of Yahweh is too expansive to be captured in a name. Faith isn't meant to narrow and confine life . . . a faith in the God of Jesus Christ expands our horizons and calls us to something more than we are all alone.

The faith I cling to tells me that love is the one absolute . . . that all else is temporary. Love may not always look forever because human beings mess up – a lot. But God is love . . . and real love is a reflection of God. A faith like that has the power to carry me through each day. And it stays true to the wonder I see all around me.

My faith today is shaped by a whole lot of people. By family and friends who accept and embrace me unconditionally. And by a whole host of mentors, teachers and examples in life – Walter Eisenbeis, Bernard Didier, Bob Morgan, Carl Dudley, Bob Jones, and Hank Yordon. Who are yours?

What does your faith look like? Have you thought about it lately?

There's an old Hebrew tale of a rabbi living in a Russian city a century ago. Disappointed by his lack of direction and sense of purpose in his life, he wandered out into the chilly evening. With his hands thrust deep into his pockets, he walked through the empty streets questioning his faith and his calling as a rabbi. He was so enshrouded in his own despair that he mistakenly wandered into a Russian military compound that was off-limits to civilians. The silence of the evening chill was shattered by the bark of a Russian soldier:

Who are you? And what are you doing here?

"Excuse me?" the rabbi replied.

I said, "Who are you? And what are you doing here?"

After a brief moment the rabbi said, "How much do you get paid each day?"

The soldier responded, *What does that have to do with you?*

"Because," said the rabbi, "I will pay you that sum if you will ask me those same two questions every day:

Who are you? And what are you doing here?

We'd do well to ask those questions every day. Who are we and what are we about? Our faith should be the telling answer. But it won't tell if we don't ask.

So this morning I invite you to do exactly what we ask our confirmands to do. When you go home this morning, I encourage you to write your own statement of faith.