

Now What???

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on Pentecost & Communion Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

May 15, 2016

Text: Acts 2:1-4; 43-47

Welcome to Pentecost Sunday which this year also happens to be Confirmation Sunday. It has long been customary in the Protestant tradition to celebrate Confirmation on Pentecost Sunday because Pentecost is widely viewed as the birthday of the Christian church. You remember Pentecost, the story in Acts we read just a few moments ago about the tongues of flame settling over the heads of the disciples, now apostles, marking the Holy Spirit descending on them and giving them the power to continue on with the work Jesus had begun during his ministry. There can be no better time to receive these new young people into full membership in the church than on the Sunday when we remember and celebrate how it all began two millennia ago.

Confirmation in our tradition is a little different than in other traditions. In the Roman Catholic and Episcopal traditions, Confirmation is considered a sacrament. It marks the young person's reaching the age of reason so that they are mentally capable of what is thought to be "a more perfect relationship with the church." In our tradition, Confirmation is a rite and not a sacrament. That's because we recognize only two sacraments – Baptism and Communion – the two actions done by Jesus

himself. But, just because we do not consider confirmation a sacrament, doesn't mean it's not of profound significance because it is. To us Confirmation is the rite by which young people make for themselves the promises their parents made for them at the time of their baptisms as infants or young children. This is an important distinction for us because this means Confirmation is literally the time when young people decide for themselves whether or not the Christian faith will be part of their lives.

And it is a real decision. These kids made a real choice as our Confirmation program came to a close. In our Confirmation program this year, we did not focus on what would be called "catechism" – the learning of specific facts of doctrine and dogma along with points of history significant in the Christian tradition. Instead we focused on what it means to be a Christian and live a Christian life. We did this by exploring faith through the *Still Speaking Daily Devotionals* published on-line every day by the United Church of Christ. Each time we met in the last seven months we had a general topic we discussed, in the way of basic information. But, what was most important and most meaningful to the kids was those *Still Speaking Devotionals*. Written by pastors from across the country serving in all sorts of ministry settings, these *Devotionals* touch on all the aspects of faith one would cover in a more traditional Confirmation class. But they do it in the words of real people living faith into reality every day.

Each devotional has a grounding Scripture verse, a brief reflection and a prayer and the topics covered are as diverse as the people writing them. Sometimes the devotionals talk about the author's own faith and where it came from. Sometimes they describe reactions to current events, like forest fires and earthquakes and floods and how the author can still find God even in the midst of these horrific situations. Sometimes they talk about their own crises of faith and how they find their way through and beyond. Sometimes they write about things that make them angry or sad or frightened and how they find their way past these emotions with God's help.

The other most critical part of the Confirmation program is all of you because the other thing I have asked the Confirmands to do is to pay attention to all of you. I posed this question to them as we began in the fall: With so many other things to do on Sundays, so many other options for what to do with all too rare spare time and so many other places to donate their hard-earned money – why do the people in this church make the choices they do to be here supporting our church with their time, their love and their money? What is it about church, about faith, about having a real relationship with Jesus that matters in life each day to these people? That was my challenge to them and I can tell you from my conversations with them that they have been watching you and they have been paying attention to what happens here. They

have sat in on a few board/committee meetings. They came to the Annual Meeting. They volunteered at the Bazaar and the Tea. They helped at the Earth Day clean-up. They have been here with you and that experience, more than any other, is why they are here asking to be confirmed into the full membership of this church. But, I don't want you to take my word for it. I want you to hear it in their own words.

The last step of the Confirmation program for them was to write a letter to the Board of Deacons requesting to be accepted into membership of the church through the act of Confirmation. And, by the way, they also had the option to choose not to be confirmed. In that case, they had to write a letter explaining why they didn't feel confirmation was something they wanted to do. But, none of them chose that option! So, I invite you now to listen to their own words explaining why they wanted to be confirmed here: [*Letters from Confirmands were read at the worship service but are not included here for confidentiality concerns for the youth.*]

So, you can tell from these letters that we have quite a special group of young people here in this church. We are truly blessed by their presence in our midst. But the question remains for them and for us – now that they have been confirmed into full membership in this church, what comes next for them and for us? How will we incorporate them into the full life and ministry of the

church? How will we continue to help them as they grow into adulthood in our midst? How will we invite them into meaningful roles and leadership, now and in the years to come? Dear friends, the question before us then is a simple one – now what???

Well, I don't have any magic formulas or surefire plans to set out before us today. I couldn't have because they don't exist. The world is changing faster than we can keep up with as individuals and as families and the church is changing right along with it. What I do have to offer in this "now what" moment is a simple question. What does God need this church to be as God's future unfolds? To what is God calling us as a church and as the individual members of the church? We have already been doing this work and some glimmers of God's hopes and dreams for us seem to be taking shape within our midst – the Pollinator Garden and Labyrinth project for one. The Mission Day Trips this summer will also create opportunities for more of you to be a part of mission activities as time permits and interests call. Even my Community Office Hours after two short weeks are revealing themselves to be a unique opportunity to increase our visibility in the community even as individual folks and I have opportunities for deep and meaningful conversations over coffee in a delightful locale, conversations that probably wouldn't happen otherwise. And there are so many more new possibilities popping up for us

all the time! It's truly exciting. The Holy Spirit is alive and well and blowing through our midst for sure.

And that observation brings us back to the beginning of this conversation about Confirmation and these wonderful young people we are welcoming into our church this morning. I came across a cartoon on Facebook this week that I just love because it captured what I hope our Confirmands will do in the midst of our church life. The cartoon shows the disciples gathered in a circle, kneeling with heads bowed and hands folded in prayer in the background. In the foreground is a little boy with a marshmallow on a stick and a man telling him, "don't even think about it." And the little boy just smiles. Dear friends, we want these incredibly gifted and special young people to think about what crazy, wonderful thing God might be asking of us that we as seasoned adults can't comprehend! We want them to feel welcome, yes. But even more than that, we want them to feel empowered to make this church, to make this faith, their own in whatever ways are meaningful to them. Our challenge is to give them the encouragement and the space and the love to do just that. Even if, *especially if*, it means something as crazy as toasting marshmallows over the sacred flaming tongues of Pentecost! How cool would that be! How amazing would that be! Oh what God must have in store for us in such a future! I can't wait.

So, who has some marshmallows and sticks? Amen.

