

Three Important Questions

Sterling UMC

April 18, 2010

Confirmation Message in Three parts

Part 1 8:15 AM– 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Acts 9:1-9 – What will you do now?

This is confirmation Sunday and my message today is in three parts. I will share a different part at each of our three services. I am calling this message three important questions. At each service I will be asking our confirmands to think about a different question. As I speak to them and ask them these questions I hope that each of you here this morning will also consider these questions.

Have you heard the old story about a duke and duchess who went for a stroll one morning? As they walked hand in hand through their lavish country estate in Europe, they noticed a man dressed in a stately uniform standing alone in their beautiful back garden. “Who is that man?” asked the duchess. “He always stands there, but I don’t know who he is.”

“Neither do I,” answered the duke, “But I, too, have seen him there many times. He always stands right there.”

The duchess decided to investigate this further. She walked over to the man and said, “Please tell me sir, who are you? Do you work here? Are you a part of our staff?” “Oh yes, My Lady,” said the man.” “I have been your faithful servant for almost thirty years.”

“Thirty years? Oh my! And what is your specific job?” asked the duchess.

“I was hired to take care of your dog,” the man replied.

“But wait a minute,” said the duchess. “My dog died twenty-seven years ago!”

To which the man replied, “Yes, My Lady, that is correct. And what, My Lady, would you like me to do now?”

Strange as it may seem, that old story, with its punch line question: “What would you like me to do now?” actually reminds me of some of the most powerful moments in the Bible. When people in the Bible are dramatically confronted by God, when people come dramatically into the presence of God in the scriptures, two questions always seem to emerge. First the people say, “Who are you,

Lord?” and then fast on the heels of that they ask, “Lord, what you want me to do? What would you like me to do now?”

Think of it: remember Moses in the wilderness of Midian. He is watching over his sheep. Like the duchess’s dogkeeper, he has a comfortable life. He has gone to work for a well-to-do man named Jethro, and he has married the boss’s daughter. It’s a good life. It’s easy, safe, cozy, pleasant, nonthreatening.

But Moses is brooding. He is worried about the terrible plight of his people. Their life is not cozy. They are slaves in Egypt. Suddenly God appears to Moses in a burning bush. Moses takes off his shoes, for he knows this is a sacred moment. He is standing in the presence of God. He is standing on holy ground. As Moses enters into conversation with God, in essence he ends up asking these two questions: “Who are you, Lord?” and “Lord, what you want me to do now?” We all know the rest of the story. God sends Moses to set his people free.

And then, in Acts 9, here is Saul, moving down the Damascus road looking for Christians to persecute and kill. Saul, too, has a comfortable life. He is well educated and highly respected. He is a religious leader, a Pharisee; and he is about the business of stamping out this new religious group who called themselves Christians. They were becoming a nuisance, so Saul became a bounty hunter, a self-appointed vigilante trying single-handedly to eliminate the followers of Jesus. But then suddenly, the risen Lord appeared to Saul on the Damascus Road. The light of the Lord’s appearance was so dazzling that Saul was momentarily blinded. Saul was “bowled over” by the powerful presence of the Lord, and all he could think of at that moment was that he needed to ask these two questions: “Who are you, Lord?” and “Lord, what do you want me to do now?”

We know the rest of the story. Saul was converted and given a new name – Paul – and it was so dramatic, he said he was a new creature, and he became the great missionary to the gentile world.

The point is clear: When we come into the presence of God, when we understand clearly who God is, the next question to be asked is simply this: “What do you want me to do; Lord, what would you like me to do now?”

That is the first question that I would like to ask all of you this morning; What will you do now? You see you have explored your faith, you have or you will make your personal statement of faith, so you have begun to really understand who God is. You are here this morning in the presence of the Lord, but the question is, when this day is over, when this service is over, once you are confirmed and join the church, what will you do? Will your daily life be any

different? Will you like Moses and Paul be a different person? Will you allow God to live in you and work through you? That is question number one, what will you do now?

Part 2 9:30 AM – Galatians 6:14-18 – Will you live up to your name?

On this confirmation Sunday my message is in three parts. I am calling this message three important questions. At 8:15 my question for our confirmands was, what will you do now? I asked them will their lives be any different after this wonderful spiritual experience. In this service I will look at question #2.

In her wonderful Mitford series of books, Jan Karon has written a book called *Shepherds Abiding*. There are many wonderful lines in that book, but one line in particular sticks out to me.

A young woman named Hope is going through a difficult time of transition. She wants to become owner of the bookstore where she works in the little town of Mitford, North Carolina.

The name of the bookstore is Happy Endings. Hope has come up with a bold but risky plan to acquire the bookstore, but she is having trouble getting everything to fall into place at the right time. She is worried, anxious, nervous, frightened, and getting close to discouragement when she receives a letter that has only one sentence. The letter reads: “Dear Hope, keep on living up to your name.”

That is our calling, isn't it – to live up to our name as Christians.

The name “Christian” means, follower of Christ, disciple of Christ, one who is of Christ.

If a Virginian is a person who lives in Virginia, then a Christian is one who lives in Christ – one who is Christlike!

And that's how we live up to our name as Christians. We take what Jesus has taught us in words and deeds, and we try our best to live in that spirit. We pray through the miracle of his grace and through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we may become Christlike in our living.

Twenty years ago now, when my first son Robbie was born, I was standing at the window of the nursery in the hospital in Lexington, Kentucky, with my nose pressed against the glass, looking at our newborn baby, our son, our first child.

Robbie was born by a C-section and immediately after he was born they whisked him away to the nursery and I didn't really have a chance to spend any time with him. For several hours they would only let me look at him through the nursery window.

That night as I stared at our new son, suddenly it hit me: I'm a father! I'm a dad! I'm a parent! And as I thought of the joy and privilege and responsibility of that, my mind drifted back to my parents and all that they had done for me.

I thought of all the times they had been there for me. I thought of the sacrifices they must have made to enable me to have all that I had. I thought of how my parents had worked hard to feed me and clothe me and help me get educated. I thought of birthdays and Christmases and Thanksgivings and vacations.

On and on I could go documenting the sacrificial love of my parents. And I thought to myself, how do you repay that? How do you measure that? How do you express your gratitude for that?

Words aren't big enough. Gifts are not sufficient. There is not enough money in the world to repay my parents for what they have done for me. So, what do I do? I "pay it forward"! I pass it on! I repay them by becoming a good parent to my children.

On a much deeper level, think of this. How do we repay Jesus Christ for what he had done for us? How do we express our thanks to him for his sacrificial and redemptive love for each one of us?

The only way we can: We pay it forward. We pass it on. We dedicate our lives to becoming the best Christians we can be: or in other words, we try our best (with the help of God) to live up to our name, "Christians." We try our best with the help of God to become Christlike.

In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul expressed it like this. The Galatians had doubted him, questioned his authority, and in essence he said to them: "Nobody has to wonder who I am. Nobody has to ask what I stand for. Nobody needs to question my allegiance to Christ and his church, because I have the marks of Jesus branded on my body. Clearly, without question, I am a slave for Christ."

The Galatians had doubted Paul. They wondered about this one who had persecuted the Christians so arduously only a short time before. They questioned his theology, his apostleship, his authority.

In answer, Paul said to the Galatians: "Look here! You don't have to wonder about me. Anyone can see that I belong to Christ! Look at my life! I am a Christian, and I am giving it all I've got to live up to that name."

Let me ask you something: can you say that? Can people look at you and see clearly that you are a Christian? Do you bear in your life the marks of Christlikeness? Are you living up to the name "Christian"? That's question #2.

This morning you have professed your faith in Jesus Christ. You will be confirmed and become full members of Christ's church. You are identifying yourself as a Christian. My question for all of you is in your life, in your words, in

your actions, in your attitudes, in the way you treat other people, will you live up to your name?

Part 3 11:00 AM– Philippians 3:12-16 – Will you run out of gas?

On this confirmation Sunday I have the wonderful opportunity to address these 11 confirmands. My message to them today has been in three parts, three important questions; questions that all of us would do well to consider. Question 1 was what will you do now? Will your lives be any different after this wonderful spiritual experience? Question 2, will you live up to your name? Will people be able to see from your life that you are a Christian? Now for question #3.

A few years ago, an interesting thing happened during the Rose Bowl parade on New Years' day. With thousands watching in person along the parade route and millions more watching on television, the world-famous Tournament of Roses parade suddenly ground to a halt. There was a long delay because one of the large floats lost power and coasted to a complete stop. The beautiful float was so huge that it covered most of the street, and the other floats could not get around it, so the parade was stopped for some time.

A quick investigation revealed that the problem was not some major mechanical failure that had stopped the float and delayed the whole parade. No, the problem was really very elementary. The large, expensive float, in all of its floral splendor had quite simply run out of gas very near the place where it started. Someone had to run to find a gallon of gas before the tournament of Roses Parade could start up again!

But then there is the rest of the story, which is most ironic, for you see, the float that ran out of gas that day was being sponsored by one of the largest and most successful oil and gas companies in the world! How embarrassing! There were some red faces along the parade route and back at the petroleum company's home office.

But you know this can happen to any of us, can't it. With some of us drivers, it's because we simply forget to watch the fuel gauge on the car's dashboard. We don't want to take the time to stop for anything! And so, sometimes we push it too close, and we sputter and come to a complete stop, because when the fuel is gone, it's gone! When the fuel is gone, the car stops.

Now the point is, it can happen to any of us. If we don't pay attention we can run out of gas! This is also true spiritually... If we are not careful, if we are not intentional, if we don't pay attention we can run out of gas spiritually.

This is precisely what the apostle Paul was talking about in his letter to the Philippians. Paul was in prison at the time he wrote this letter. Many scholars believe that Paul was executed by the Romans not long after he sent this letter.

He probably saw the handwriting on the wall. He likely knew his days on earth were quickly coming to a close, so he wrote to his good friends in the Phillipian church to affirm them, to assure them, to give them his last words of affection and instruction, and to encourage them to hang in there and to hold on to their faith, and not to “run out of gas” when he was no longer around to watch over them and to feed them spiritually.

Paul expressed it like this: “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind...Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. (Philippians 3:13b-16)

In other words, Paul was saying to them, “Hold on to your faith, come what may. Whatever happens don’t lose heart! Keep on believing! Keep on trusting God! Keep on growing spiritually. Don’t give up! Don’t quit! Don’t run out of gas! Press on!”

Have you heard about the convention where the corporate sales manager got up before all 2,000 of the firm’s salespersons and asked, “Did the Wright Brothers ever quit?” The members of the sales force shouted, “No!” Then the manager yelled out, “Did Charles Lindbergh ever quit?” Again, the salespersons shouted back, “No!” A third time the manager yelled out: “Did Joan of Arc ever quit?” The salespeople warming to the moment, shouted back even louder. “No!” This questioning and answering continued, and then the sales manager bellowed out one last time: “Did Thorndyke McKeester ever quit?” There was a long silence. Finally, one brave man stood up and said what everybody else was thinking, “Sir, forgive me for asking, but who is Thorndyke McKeester? We never heard of him.” The sales manager snapped back, “Of course you never heard of him, because he quit!”

Now let me ask you something with all the feeling I have in my heart. Will you run out of gas? That’s question #3. Will you quit? I hope and pray that you will not. That’s what the apostle Paul was saying to the Phillipian Christians: Please don’t quit! Don’t quit on life! Don’t quit on your faith! Don’t quit on the church! Don’t quit on God! Hold fast to what you have obtained: press on.

My prayer for each one of you confirmands, and every one of you who are here this morning is that you will not allow life or circumstances to cause you to quit. That you will hold fast to the faith that you have professed. You see today is not the end. Yes your experience with confirmation is coming to a close, but your journey of faith is just beginning. So I hope that you know what you are going to

do now. That you will live up to your name. And that as you go from this place to live your life for the Lord, you will not run out of gas.