

October 25, 2020
Reformation Sunday
The Confirmation of Joseph Karl Gundal and Julia Frances Warner
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Psalm 46
Pastor Amanda L. Warner
Zoom Worship during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Faith, Not Place

It had never happened before. It was in another time, a time when we could go places and do things with strangers and not wear masks and not be afraid. It was last February, really not all that long ago, just nine months, but still looking back it feels like another world.

The Confirmation class and Britton and I were at Camp Calumet in New Hampshire for Confirmation Camp. I walked into the room where we were going to have lunch. I looked around for a table filled with kids from Emmanuel and discovered that there wasn't one. I knew that the kids had gone into the dining hall before me, but a quick glance around the hall showed me that they weren't there.

So, I looked more closely and more carefully. They were indeed in the room. But they weren't sitting at a table, all together. They had spread out across the room. They were sitting at different tables, with kids from other churches, getting to know new people, and in some cases, making new friends.

It was a good thing, but, like I said, it was a new thing. None of the other groups that I've taken to Confirmation Camp had ever intentionally spread out to meet new people. Other groups had participated in the large group activities but then had bounced back into our smaller "Emmanuel" group with relief the moment that the large group activity was over. It was

interesting to have a group at Camp that was interested in connecting with kids beyond the group that they came with.

When I was discussing our Calumet trip with one of the Confirmation kids, he said that one of the reasons that he wanted to get to know the other kids at camp was that our religion is about faith and not just about place.

It's not about being from the same town or from the same area or even being from the same church. It's about having shared beliefs that reach beyond our geography or shared life experience.

Talk about a message that we have needed this year. Faith, not place. Because, if our religion was only about place, then we would have been in even more serious trouble than we have been in during the past seven and a half months.

We talked in a recent Confirmation class about the last time some of our Confirmation students had been in the church building. It was March 11th, for a Wednesday Lenten service. There weren't many people there, as what would become global pandemic had arrived on our shores, and two days later, I was sending out emails that we were not going to be meeting in the building for worship the next Sunday and that more information would be released as we learned more about the pandemic that was shutting down schools and businesses and filling hospitals and graves.

As it did for people in almost every other sector of society, the shutdown came somewhat out of the blue and we didn't have a plan for what we would do to keep our worship life and our ministries going.

But, a week after that March 11th, in person Wednesday Lenten service, on March 18th, we were on Zoom for our worship for the first time. Of course, we couldn't have a soup supper over Zoom, but still, we could gather

together for Wednesday evening prayer. We discovered that we could still worship and pray together and hear the message that one of our members had prepared about faith in daily life, everyday spirituality.

By Sunday, March 22nd, we were on Zoom for Sunday morning worship and we were learning something about what it means to be a community of faith. It's about faith, not place.

We saw that as we learned to inhabit and worship in this new virtual space; as we learned to worship on Zoom and share worship resources over email and YouTube and Facebook, as people logged in from their living rooms and dining rooms and decks, as people recorded hymns and worship music in their kitchens and bedrooms that would help the prayers and the songs of the church go forward, as people created artwork to help tell the stories of scripture as people joined us for worship, from all over the country, from the Cape, from Kentucky, from South Carolina, from Connecticut, from Maine, from New Hampshire, even from Canada.

We mourned the loss of our worship space, with its Lenten simplicity and its Easter splendor and its Pentecost red, but still we found out over and over again in so many ways, as we took communion outside, as we worshiped together and prayed together and welcomed others to share in worship and fellowship with us, that what binds us together is faith, not place.

One of the things that I try to teach the kids in our Confirmation class is that just because life can be difficult, complicated, unfair, and even, at times, tragic, doesn't mean that God is not with us or God is not real.

Last year, we were studying our Bible year curriculum in Confirmation class, and we learned some of the Bible stories about people who had experienced disappointments, tragedies, and challenges along their way.

We read about how they had sometimes doubted and sometimes kept the faith and we learned about how, whether their faith remained steadfast or whether it wavered, they experienced God's presence and God's blessing the midst of their struggles, not necessarily making their troubles go away, but giving them hope, strength, and even calm in the storms of life.

This year, I feel like rather than telling the kids about that, they, we, kind of lived it.

And here's an amazing thing, the Confirmation class that Joey and Julia, our Confirmands today were a part of, along with their classmates, Kayleigh, Maverick, Alan, Joey L., Isabelle, and Pat, in the midst of their many disappointments this year, in the midst of the challenge that their education became, in the midst of the turmoil and worry of all of their peers and of all of the adults around them, decided to adopt the spirit of the words of Hebrews 10:25 for themselves, "not neglecting to meet together, but encouraging one another..."

We kept meeting as a Confirmation class every other week after the Covid-19 lockdown put an end to our regular in person classes. I decided that we wouldn't attempt Confirmation curriculum over Zoom, but I still felt it was valuable for us to meet together regularly, to check in with each other, to pray together, and to share highs and lows with each other.

But here's the thing. When the regular Confirmation year came to an end in May, I gave the kids a choice. I asked them if they wanted to keep meeting during the summer, in our every other week gathering.

I suspect that they didn't know that they were living out the words of scripture, the exhortation of Hebrews 10:25, when they made the decision that they made, but they chose to keep meeting over the summer.

And so, we met. We shared stories, we shared good news and bad news, and we prayed. We prayed for everything. We prayed for the top five, which, with a new global crisis became the top six. In addition to people who have no one to pray for them, minority groups, people with depression and anxiety, absent friends, which is a prayer for anyone who might be absent from class that week or even just running late, and the environment, this year, we added “Coronavirus everything” to our weekly prayers, meaning that we were praying for people who were sick with Covid-19, for their caregivers, for people mourning the death of a loved one who had died of the disease, for healthcare workers and for other frontline workers, for people who live alone, for people who were unsafe in their homes, for people who missed distanced friends and family members, for people who had lost jobs or businesses, for people making decisions about public health policies, for students and teachers who were learning and teaching in new ways, and for anything and anyone else that we couldn’t think of that had been affected by the pandemic.

We prayed for friends, family members, and church members who were sick, injured, or struggling. We prayed for places experiencing natural disasters. We prayed for friends and family members who were, in the midst of a time of struggle, still experiencing blessings, graduations, new babies, new jobs, even weddings.

In the midst of a time of struggle, sorrow, and confusion, in those not required, but chosen Confirmation gatherings, we experienced fellowship and comfort from God, who is a very present help in trouble.

Today, the day when we are celebrating Reformation Sunday in the church, was not supposed also to be Confirmation Day. Confirmation was originally scheduled to be on Pentecost, May 31st of this year.

It became clear pretty quickly into the lockdown, that we were not going to be able to have the Confirmation celebration that I hoped that we would have on May 31st, with a full church, looking so beautiful in its red paraments and filled with red flowers, with friends and family and church family gathered to celebrate Joey and Julia and to surround them with our prayers, with a reception in Kask Hall with cake and coffee and laughter, and with the kids having to get hundreds of pictures taken of them while all they want to do is get a piece of cake, and so, the Gundals and Britton and I decided to push back our kids' Confirmations until today.

But then, of course, it became clear as the summer passed and the fall began that things would not be even close to "back to normal" by today, by October 25th, so we had to pivot again and figure out exactly how to do what we were trying to avoid by changing the date of Confirmation in the first place. We had to figure out how to have a Zoom worship Confirmation.

As much as I didn't want to end up in this place, trying to adapt a liturgy, a celebration that is one of my favorite rites of passage in the church, for Zoom worship I am experiencing a blessing from having Confirmation on this day.

That blessing is Psalm 46, the assigned Psalm for Reformation Day every year, the Psalm that inspired Martin Luther's hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*.

This year, I didn't have to explain to the Confirmation class that God is with us even during times of trouble. They lived it. They are living it. They

are experiencing a time of trouble. And we are with them on that journey. So, the words of Psalm 46 that reach to us from the ancient world, from at least 2,500 years ago, sound more ripped from the headlines than an episode of Law and Order.

*Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth be moved,
and though the mountains shake in the depths of the sea;
though its waters rage and foam,
and though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
The nations rage, and the kingdoms shake;
God speaks, and the earth melts away. (Psalm 46:2-3, 6)*

In storms and fires, we have seen the earth moved, the mountains shake, the waters rage and foam.

In fears and dangers brought by a pandemic, in racial violence and in cries for justice, in the throes of a contentious election season we have seen the nations rage and the kingdoms shake.

We have seen all of these words move out of the realm of ancient poetry and prayer and become our lived experience, as we have watched people in our own country flee from their homes from the oncoming storms and fires and come back to find desolation, as we have watched peaceful protests be met with violence, as we have watched neighborhoods burn, and as we have watched people turn in on themselves and against their neighbors in a time of great trouble.

And yet, as true as all of that was in the ancient past for the people of Israel, as true as it may be in our own lives, when the very foundations of our lives seem to be shaking, still the Psalm starts with these words:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. (Psalm 46:1)

And then it says this: *Therefore, we will not fear. (Psalm 46:2a)*

Well, maybe that is saying too much, maybe we have had, maybe we will have our frightened times, our frightened hours and days, but fear will not win.

Because in the midst of our shaking cities, God is and God will help. Because in spite of the rains that pour into our homes and hospitals, because in spite of the waters that rise in the relentless hurricanes, we have hope in a river that makes the city glad, and brings water to our drought parched lands, to our dry and dusty spirits. Because in a world that knows too much violence, too much death, too much fear, too much war, too much injustice, we have this hope, this promise, that God, often accused of being the source of violence, is actually the one *who makes war to cease in all the world; who breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, and burns the shields with fire. (Psalm 46:9)*

And as God's people, we have this calling to be people of peace, to be still, and know that God is God. We have this word of hope, a word of peace, a word of comfort to people living in anxious times.

Today is Joey and Julia's Confirmation Day. There are so many ways

in which this day is not what we expected it to be. There are so many ways that this Confirmation Day is different from other Confirmation Days.

But the most important things are exactly what they need to be. Today, Joey and Julia are going to make their promises to live out the beliefs of the community of faith into which they were baptized.

To live among God's faithful people.

To hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper.

To proclaim the good news of God in Christ through Word and deed.

To serve all people, following the example of Jesus,

And to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

And Joey and Julia, of all people, who have ever made their Confirmation vows, know that the religion into which they were baptized and which they are about to claim as their own, is about faith and not just place.

They know it because they have not just learned it, they have lived it.

They know that living among God's faithful people and engaging in the acts of worship as ways of being filled up and fed by the God who loves them can take many different shapes.

They know that proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, and serving all people, following the example of Jesus, and striving for justice and peace in all the earth, does not take place only in the confines of a church building but in the ways that we live our lives in our homes and with our families and online and in school and when we interact with our neighbors and when we engage with our communities, when we

shop, when we go out with friends, when we make choices about how we will treat people and how we inhabit the earth.

Today, even though we can't gather together in person, Joey and Julia, are still surrounded by the love and care and prayers of their church community and their Confirmation classmates, and their family and friends.

Today, the gifts of grace are available to Joey and Julia as they sing songs and pray prayers, and take communion outside in the courtyard, on their Confirmation Day, with their faith community.

And today, they receive the gift of Psalm 46 words that that spoke of the challenges as well as of the hope and faith of their ancient mothers and fathers in faith, who first wrote and prayed the words of this Psalm; words that strengthened and inspired Martin Luther, as he experienced the shaking of the foundations of his own world and of his own faith, words to give them courage and hope in such a time as this, and in whatever times of trouble and challenge await them in their lives.

Joey and Julia, on your Confirmation Day, these words are a gift and a promise to you, from your community of faith and from the God who loves you.

The Lord of hosts is with you;

the God of Jacob is your stronghold. (Psalm 46:7, 11)

Thanks be to God. Amen.