



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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4th Sunday of Easter

Rev. Brent J. Eelman

**Graduating From Church
A Confirmation Sermon**

Galatians 1: 1-12

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the members of God’s family who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

No doubt, you noticed the strange title for this sermon. We don’t graduate from church, do we? We don’t, but we do. (How’s that for logic!) On this confirmation day, what I propose to do is examine the “church graduation syndrome” in terms of Paul’s letter to the Galatians and our contemporary culture. Then I have a: 1. Message for this confirmation class. 2. A message for their parents. 3. A message for the congregation.

I

Paul’s letter to the Galatians is a compelling message of Christian freedom. In that letter he declared that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of freedom to this world. But his letter begins with a curious statement: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.” Paul was concerned about the various groups, also claiming to be Christian, who were twisting the gospel message. People were leaving the church in Galatia and following these other leaders and their message.

The concern about people “falling away from the faith is with us today”. When Karen and I were married, my wife’s family came from a very conservative Lutheran background. Her aunt was

particularly concerned that Karen was marrying a non-Lutheran, particularly a Presbyterian and a pastor to boot. She brought her concern to my future mother in law, "I hope Karen will not lose her religion."

This is not a sermon about comparative religions replete with warnings about not becoming Methodist or Lutheran. No. I don't think that is the issue today. I believe that if Paul were writing his letter today it might read: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to work, recreation, parties, sports, the shore, the mountains, travel, sleep. Etc."

I think it would be especially directed to people the age of our confirmation class. "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in grace... and believe that you have graduated from church." That is the reality that we face. Confirmation is often perceived by parents, the congregation, and the confirmands as a baccalaureate from church. Somewhere along the way confirmation has come to mean that: "You don't have to come to Sunday School any more. You don't have to read and study your bible... your ticket to heaven is punched and so we can go on our merry way."

The statistics are jarring: 64% of all confirmation students will drop out of church within two years after high school graduation—never to return! When the 36% do return, it is often to get married and to have their children baptized. Let's be fair. Some try and return but find it difficult, and claim that the church no longer speaks to them; that it is too mired in its own institutionalism, and that it is a joyless relic.

Where are they going? We like to think that they are going to other congregations, and some churches have been able to attract a percentage of these youthful seekers. Most end up investing their time and resources in recreation, houses, hobbies and travel. 95% of them will say that they believe in God, but most of them prefer to nurture their spirituality from "how to books" yoga, meditation, and TV shows like "Oprah." They have, in effect, graduated from church.

II

Now the messages: They are addressed to particular groups, but others may listen. First to the confirmation class. The timing is very good for you. Sunday School and fellowship are about to end for the summer and you can slip off into anonymity and pursue other things on Sunday and by next fall it will be a habit. (I am kidding.) You have enough guilt trips laid on you; you don't need one from me. Let me share with you some of my experience, post-confirmation. I was very ready to get out of church. I couldn't wait to go to college, and my college church attendance non-existent. Yet, here I am. It is not like I cannot do anything else. My call back to the church came from the realization that my life was in need of change. Ultimately, I could be a success at a number of things and still feel empty and purposeless. I discovered that sports cars are a lot of fun, (I had an MGB) and that boats can be a blast. I have owned over 30 different guitars in my life and a couple dozen amplifiers. I enjoyed playing in combos and a big band. It was a good time, and I still do many of these things... but they did not (and do not) give me what my heart longs for and what my soul needs. I have discovered that I cannot purchase hope. I have discovered that no life was ever transformed by sports car or a guitar. These things never made God's world better for others. They can't address the issues of pain and injustice. They do not speak to the darkness of the soul that infects this world and casts its shadow over our spirit. One thing did: the message of Gospel... particularly the message of Paul when he wrote to the Philippians... "all these things I count as garbage, so that I may know Jesus Christ." My call to

ministry recognized that others experienced this same emptiness and longed for something better. If I had found it in Jesus, I was morally compelled to share it with others.

No guilt trip: You may choose to "graduate" from church... The world that we live in has managed to squeeze our spiritual lives out of everything... But I hope that somewhere in your consciousness this message is burned.. and that you will recall it when you find yourself hungry and thirsty for something more... I want this to be your home. A place where you receive food and nurtures your soul... food you cannot find anywhere else.

III

Next: to the parents. I want to acknowledge your faithfulness and thank you. When your child was baptized, you stood in front of the congregation and you vowed to bring your child up in the church, so that someday they would have this moment to confirm their baptism. Your child has said "yes" to something that is important to you.

Raising a child is a challenge... and you have met one of the challenges. Today your child said "yes" to their baptism.

When my daughter was in the 8th grade, she wanted to watch a TV show called "Friends". We decided that we would watch the show as a family and so we tuned it in. As the show progressed I realized that the behavior of the characters in this show was not what I wanted my daughter to model. The attitudes towards sexuality was casual to say the least. I looked over at my wife and Karen gave me one of those looks that said, "Don't turn the TV off, stupid." So we watched it until the end. Then at the end of the show, I turned the TV off and said: "Let's have a family discussion." My daughter interrupted. "Dad I know what you are going to talk about. I just want to say one thing before we start this family discussion. I affirm your values." That ended that. Where did she learn that? Where did she discuss and contemplate her values and her parent's values? In Church.. Sunday School and Youth Fellowship.

Parents.. I want you to contemplate the values that you continue to model for your children. They should be values that you want them to affirm.

IV

Finally, to the congregation. My charge to all of you gathered here is: be the church!

- Be the church that receives these young adults..
- Be the church that listens to them.
- Be the church that allows them to lead.
- Be the church that hears in their voice a prophetic message.

Don't squelch their energy. They are God's gift to this congregation, and we should treasure them like a gift.

In one of my previous congregations, someone came up with the idea that our confirmation class should attend committee meetings as part of their confirmation experience. I was surprised that the students showed up for these meetings both eager and curious. But we discontinued that because the students were so turned off by the pettiness, the arguing, and the behavior that often characterizes church life. In their own way, the youth held up a mirror to the us and we realized we needed to change our behavior.

I have joked and said that the true test of Christian faith is to serve on a Christian committee. It is not that funny. Be the church that Christ has called you to be!

I have been thinking a lot about my own call to the ministry. 38 years ago, when I was ordained, I became a pastor because I believed that the gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to change lives. I believed that the gospel of Christ had the power to make this world a better place. I

believed that the gospel of Christ spoke with moral authority to the issues of our day. I still believe these things... Yet the reality is that most pastors spend their time managing an institution.... And when we do that, we often lose sight of the power of the gospel and our own call... We regularly sacrifice the power of the Holy Spirit to the god of smooth administration. Be the church.... Let the power of the Holy Spirit be exhibited in your lives. Practice the values that Christ taught: forgiveness, grace, forbearance and love. Be the church of Jesus Christ... not a spiritual institution.

If there is passion in my voice, it is because I believe this is as important a day in the life of this church as any. In a way.. this is like graduation... but my prayer is that you do not graduate from church... but graduate to faithful discipleship.

May God's love go with you always. Amen.