“The Sacred Act of Confirmation”

Acts 8:26-40

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I remember the class like it was yesterday. I took it pretty seriously, knowing the information learned would be vital for my life. I would use the education I received on a daily basis.

The topic? Driver’s Ed. As a 15 year old, excited about getting my learner’s permit and awaiting the day when I’d get license, I was overly excited about Driver’s Ed. I didn’t want any delays in getting my license.

I remember the curriculum we used. I remember my instructor, Mr. Z. I remember his catchy little phrase “hit the blinkie with your pinkie!” A reminder to use your turn signal, something that many drivers seem to have missed in their driver’s education. I remember the first time I got behind the wheel, feeling the weight of responsibility that was now in my hands. I remember getting on the interstate for the first time, my instructor next to me with that backup brake pedal in the passenger seat. Just in case a nervous student forget where her own brake pedal was.

There was nothing particularly special about this class. It wasn’t the most engaging curriculum. It still required tests like any other class. But I think the reason why the details of the class remain imbedded in my memory is because driving was a hugely important rite of passage for me and my friends. And, because I drive on almost a daily basis, I put to use what I learned on almost a daily basis.

I would imagine we all have some class from our past that has stuck with us. The learning we gained from it, useful in our everyday lives. Perhaps for the writer, a course on literature remains at the forefront of their education memory. Or an accountant may have had an inspirational math course which launched them on their career. I always love to hear about the classes that impacted people. What is it that sticks with them years later?

I’m a bit ashamed to admit that my time spent in driver’s Ed as a 15 year old is much more vivid than my time spent in my confirmation class at church. I went through confirmation right around the same time as I was working for my driver’s license. But I fear my memory of confirmation is foggy.

I recall sitting in the choir room at church, with 10 of my fellow high school students. I think the class went on for 8 or 10 weeks. Or maybe it was longer? I remember something being said about a guy named Calvin. At some point we took a quiz to determine our spiritual gifts. As you can tell, my experience of confirmation was much less impactful on me than Driver’s Ed.

I’ve heard a similar reflection from others who grew up Presbyterian and went through confirmation. The teachings didn’t really stick. That they feel biblically illiterate and theologically inept.

Is this a failing of the church? Are we not doing a good enough job of teaching our young people about our church and what we believe? About the history and theology? Do we Presbyterians not take the role of confirmation seriously enough?

We have certainly veered away from what it looks like in the Romam Catholic tradition, our parent church. When the Protestant Reformers split from the Roman Catholic Church, back in the 15th century, we did away with 5 of the sacraments, including confirmation. Our church branch decided to only acknowledge 2 sacraments, baptism and communion, because they were instituted by Jesus himself. The other five sacraments turned into lesser actions, though still important.

Confirmation for us in the Presbyterian world is more about teaching our young ones about the faith. We don’t look at it as an acknowledgement of them reaching the age of reason. The time when they become old enough to be responsible for their sin. In our reformed church, we rely on the grace of God and don’t recognize the so called age of reason. We trust that young and old, we are in God’s hands and there’s no specific age when we must account for our wrongdoings.

When our church tradition decided to do away with the designation of sacrament for confirmation, it got demoted in value. We no longer hold it in such high esteem. We don’t have an agreed upon way of doing it. Each church is different. Some, like the church I grew up in, have a class for high school students to indoctrinate them into the faith. Others have an informal process of teaching young minds over many years, letting confirmation be more of a life journey than a set curriculum.

So what is the right way to go about confirmation? Should it be a structured curriculum with exams and requirements? Or should it be looser? More of an informal conversation leading into spiritual development?

There is certainly something to be said for both options. But if we look at the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, we see an argument in favor of the more informal option. Because in this story, there is no formal curriculum required for membership in the church. No exams needed in order to be considered a Christian.

What we see in this story is a roadside encounter with the Gospel.

Philip is traveling away from Jerusalem, in the outskirts of the country to tell others about Jesus. The Holy Spirit prompts him to go over to a chariot where he finds the Ethiopian man. This man is rather interesting. He is reading the prophet Isaiah aloud, as was customary of scripture back in that time. So, we know he’s a bit educated if he can read the text. We know he’s rather wealthy if he is riding in a chariot and is a trusted treasurer of the queen. We know that he is a seeker, curious about religion. We are told he was leaving the Temple, but because of his status in the world, he would not have been permitted into the temple. We know that he is humble enough to ask for help in understanding the text he is reading.

Philip encounters this man in his chariot and sees an opportunity to tell him about the life and work of Jesus Christ. We don’t know the details of what he shares with the man. No doubt he told him about Jesus’ love for all people. He probably told him that Christ was the messiah, long awaited for by the world. He probably told him that Christ would return someday.

After hearing the good news of the Gospel, the Ethiopian is so moved by the story, he asks to be baptized on the spot. He wants to be initiated into the Christian community right then and there. Philip says “why not? You clearly feel moved by the Spirit to convert to Christianity. I’ve told you all you really need to know. Let’s head to the water and make this official.

And that was it. After a brief conversation, the Ethiopian man was baptized, signifying his new life in Christ. Philip mysteriously disappears and the Ethiopian goes on his way.

This is perhaps the most informal confirmation class in history. And it all happened in the span of about an hour.

There was no weekly class, no curriculum. There wasn’t even a called Session meeting to examine the new candidate and make sure he was properly educated on the ways of Christianity. It was as simple as a conversation with someone who could excitedly explain the Gospel.

We aren’t told what happens to the Ethiopian when he returns home. Hopefully he continued his faith journey. Hopefully he told others about Jesus, spreading the Gospel to northern Africa.

What we do know is that he was transformed in that chariot on the side of the road. He went about his way a changed person all because of the Gospel he heard.

This story offers a sigh of relief to those of us who feel ill equipped in our faith. For those of us who can’t recall the details of our confirmation class. For those of us who don’t feel like we know enough about theology or history.

Because the good news is, we don’t have to obtain a wealth of knowledge in order to be Christians. It isn’t about having all the facts or all the answers. It isn’t about relying on a formal confirmation process to be grounded in our tradition.

All it takes to be a Christian is a little bit of faith and whole lot of curiosity, just the like that Ethiopian eunuch.

Confirmation - our initiation into the faith community - does not have to be grueling or extensive. It doesn’t have to mean a year of studying and memorizing and reciting. To be confirmed in your faith doesn’t require a test. Confirmation into our church can be as simple and poetic as a roadside conversation where the love of Christ is discussed. Questions are asked, curiosities are explored. A teacher or a friend might share the news of the Gospel, and the one listening might be moved by the words. This informal encounter, like the one between Philip and eunuch, might be enough to launch a person on their faith journey. This might be all it takes for that person to tap into that curiosity and pursue understanding. Wrestling with those big questions of our faith, but committed to seeking answers in the community of church.

This is perhaps the most authentic version of confirmation. A brief encounter, rooted in love, leading to a lifetime of spiritual development.

As we consider this in our church, we can all relax when we think of our own experience of confirmation, or lack thereof. One doesn’t need to be formally confirmed in order to be fully included in the body of Christ. One merely needs to have an encounter with the teachings of Christ, be encouraged to ask questions, and spend the rest of this life seeking answers. Thanks be to God, Amen.