

New Beginnings—Growth
Ephesians 3:14-21
Mark 4:26-34

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
June 7, 2015

Today is an incredibly special day for this church as we celebrate here this morning a “new beginning” and a “life event” for two of our youth. Rebecca Maciag and Samuel Epitime have undergone a period of study and preparation and they have both chosen to be confirmed in the faith into which they were baptized by their parents and they have both chosen to be commissioned for discipleship as members of this congregation.

It would be sermon enough just to hear their personal statements of faith, to listen carefully to the questions asked of them in professing their faith publicly, to participate in the prayers offered on their behalf and then to join with them around the Lord’s Table to receive the sacrament as a visible sign of God’s invisible grace at work among us.

Rebecca and Sam, your actions today are far more inspiring to the congregation than anything i could say from this pulpit. Everybody knows that actions speak louder than words. What you are about to do could stand alone and *be the sermon*. All I can hope to do is add a few footnotes and make a few connections between your actions here today and God’s Word from the holy Scriptures.

The first reading from the epistle to the Ephesians is a prayer for Christians which I picked it out today especially for you. There are two verses in particular that I want you to know are my prayer for you. Here are the verses, and here is the prayer. Rebecca and Samuel,

“I pray that... you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through [God’s] Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” (Ephesians 3:16-17)

You see, up until today, your Christian growth has been someone else’s primary responsibility. Your parents chose to have you baptized. Your parents chose to raise you as disciples of Jesus Christ. Your parents chose this church as your “home base”—your place of worship and your primary faith community. They were like gardeners, and with their help and encouragement you have grown your own roots in the faith. They have taken care to get you established as Christians—the way we hope those plants we put into the Memorial Garden last Sunday afternoon will get established—so that their roots draw water and nutrients from the soil to grow and thrive and bloom.

Now you are established. Now your parents are ready to hand the gardening tools and the gardening responsibilities over to you. From now on, from today forward, your Christian growth is no longer their primary responsibility. It is yours. *Yours*. They’re

going to still help, and we're all going to help, and I'm going to help—we promise you that! But the responsibility shifts, today, *from them to you*.

That's why I think Ephesians 3:16-17 is the exact right prayer for your confirmation. I pray... we pray... "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith as you are being rooted and grounded in love!"

Love is the soil. Love is God's being. God's will. God's M.O. Love is the whole point behind everything God has ever done in scriptures, in human history, in and through the church, and in your own lives up until this very minute. Your roots are strong enough now, and they go deep enough into this soil of divine love for you to feel ready, and be ready, to claim Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and publicly invite him to dwell in your hearts through faith as your own personal choice.

Know that you have our support. We've got your backs. Any one of us in this room would walk through a fire for you if we had to. This decision to be confirmed is your choice to make but you are not "on your own" from here on out. We are your allies. Your team mates. Your equals. Your friends.

The world in which you will live out your Christian faith doesn't look like the world did when many of the rest of us were confirmed. Your generation, your age group, are known as the "Digital Natives." You are the first generation of people in human history ever on planet earth to grow up entirely in the era of digital media and big data.

It's hard to grasp what this means and where it is all heading. I was looking at reports from Intel and at an analysis by a company called Excelacom, about just how much information is exchanged over the internet and here's what I learned.

In a single minute, over IP networks, there are on average 293,000 status updates on Facebook, 123,060 posts to Instagram, 547,200 new tweets on Twitter, 1.04 million VINE loops, 2.78 million videos viewed on YouTube, 2.4 million Google searches performed and 204 million emails sent. Every minute.

I also read that if a person wanted to *view* just one second's worth of all of the video crossing IP networks (not one minute's worth, but one second's worth of video), it would take a person five years!

Information and photos and music and news and pseudo-news, information and mis-information are all whizzing back and forth over the internet every second and everyone has access to it on computers and smart phones and with all of that going on all the time how do anyone stay "rooted" and "grounded" in any one thing?!

That's something that you're going to have to figure out, moving forward, Rebecca and Samuel. How do you intend to stand your ground as Christians? How will you keep your focus on Christ? How will you safeguard against the lure and attraction of other religious choices? Or of no religious faith in particular?

You're going to have friends who are "all over the map," so to speak. You're going to have friends who say "I don't need to go to church to be a Christian." You're going to have friends who say, "I'm spiritual but not religious." You're going to have friends who say, "how can you honestly believe that stuff?"

How will you "hold your own"? How will you stay the course and keep the commitments you are making today?

My hope is that your Confirmation Class experience gave you some experience with different tools and techniques for keeping your faith alive and growing in the years to come.

As part of Confirmation Class, I invited you to visit d365.org for daily prayer and scripture reading, and to keep a journal. I invited you to ask questions, and we created our class lessons around your questions. I invited you to choose an adult friend to be your sponsor and to interview that adult friend and spend some time together. I invited you to be leaders in the church—you helped lead the Ash Wednesday Service with me. I invited you to attend an overnight spiritual retreat with other Presbyterian youth also going through confirmation. And I invited you to think of a service project and accomplish it together.

These weren't random activities that I thought up just to keep you busy!! Nor were these ways for me to "test" you to see if you were ready to become church members. Nope. Each assignment and activity for Confirmation Class was "practice" for what lies ahead.

- 1) Daily prayer and Bible reading—is an essential spiritual discipline that helps you know God, feel God's presence and follow where you sense God is leading you.
- 2) When things get tough—and they will from time to time—it helps to have spiritual friends. Sam I hope ten years from now you still have Bruce's number in your phone and that you and he will hang out, kick the soccer ball around, and talk about how God has been at work in your lives. Rebecca, I hope that you and Eve will always have a special connection and, because prayer is important to both of you, I like to think that ten years from now when you've graduated from college and are already working and maybe starting your own family you and she will still be exchanging prayer requests and checking in with each other.
- 3) We went on a retreat together and in my experience, spiritual retreats—time away structured for spiritual nourishment apart from the regularly routine—can be hugely helpful in strengthening and deepening one's experience of God.
- 4) Some people feel closest to God in church, others in nature, and still others feel closest to God when they are serving and helping. Your service project to beautify the Memorial Garden in loving memory of people like your Aunt Barbara, Rebecca, and the other "saints" who have gone before—this service project wasn't easy, but it

went extremely well, and you brought people together who might not normally have come together, to accomplish a task that wouldn't have gotten done otherwise. Serving, collaborating, identifying a need and then mobilizing to take action—this is a huge part of what it means to be a disciple! I hope you'll do more and more of it!! And I hope you'll sense how God is working through you when you serve others.

And I hope that your decision to join this church will strengthen you to be Christ's representatives wherever you are in all that you do.

If faith is a seed that was planted in you, that has taken root and grown, now you are becoming, today, the gardener responsible for tending and keeping the plant alive. Give your faith what it needs—the equivalent of sunlight, water and nutrients.

And may Christ “dwell in your hearts through faith as you are being rooted and grounded in love”—on your Confirmation Day and in the long years that lie ahead.

You're awesome. I'm really proud of you. And I invite you now to come forward together with your sponsors, Eve, and Bruce, to present your statements of faith and make your public profession of faith.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling