

This morning, we have the inspiring privilege of witnessing the confirmation of two of our young people—McKinley and Sadie. It's a joyful day for them, for their families, and for all of us! Because all of us are invested in these two teens. They have been a part of our community, and we have seen them participate, whether in Christian education programs or reading a lesson or lighting Advent wreath candles or helping out at church meals. They have gone through Confirmation classes and now they are being confirmed, affirming for themselves the promises God made to them in their baptisms. We are grateful they valued their faith enough to complete this course of Confirmation and to make public affirmation of their faith on this day. We are in this thing called church together, and we are glad of it.

This rite of confirmation is happening because of choices that have been made. Choices on the part of our confirmands and their families. All of us make choices, all of the time, and they come in a wide variety of flavors and difficulty and importance. Already this morning, each of us decided what to have for breakfast and what to wear. The first choice is usually relatively simple for me; the latter is often harder than it should be, because especially at this time of year, I can't figure out if I'm going to feel too cold or too warm by midday in whatever I choose to wear in the morning. More significantly, we all chose to come to church this morning. And that *is* significant, because attending church is no longer a cultural norm; we come to worship for a reason other than community pressure in our era, and so our presence here is a choice that reflects our values. The same can be said of Sadie and McKinley's choice to be confirmed. We no longer live in a culture that expects us to attend confirmation classes and be confirmed. Of course, our families often play a role in a teen's decision about this, but from what I know of our two confirmands this morning, they are thoughtful young people whose participation in confirmation and in our service this morning *does* reflect *their* choice, also. A choice that again, in today's world, is somewhat countercultural. They are showing both determination and courage in their choice to affirm their faith.

Let's think for a moment about what this choice *is* that they are actually making. McKinley and Sadie, I just want to be clear that in choosing to be confirmed this morning, you are *not* deciding exactly what you believe as of today and for the rest of your life. You are not choosing to lock down your belief system into some rigid pattern that will never evolve, change, or grow. *That's not* what you're doing. What *you are choosing* to do is this: you are choosing to commit to continue on a life journey that started with your baptism, a journey of *faith*. All of us here are on the same journey. We know that the journey is unpredictable; it is joyful and it is perilous. Your faith and understanding of God and the world will undoubtedly change, evolve and grow over the length of your journey, just as is true of every person here. As far as I know, no one here this morning thinks they have all the answers when it comes to the mysteries of faith and God; I certainly don't! We're all pilgrims together, traveling through life, recognizing that God is at the heart of our journey and that we make the journey together as siblings in Christ. Most of us may have more questions than answers, so it's fine if that's how it is for you, too. But what we do know is this: that the grace of God is expressed in a love for us that is unequivocal and immense. That is the knowing that makes all the difference. So, your confirmation is a lot *less* like signing into an agreement of rules and regulations about how to live, and it is a lot *more* like signing up for an adventurous trip with other travelers and the Divine Navigator of Christ. The identifying mark of this journey, as laid out by Jesus in our Gospel lesson this morning, is love. The love of God for us; our love for God and others. By being confirmed, you---like all of us here this morning---are choosing love.

There are other options besides choosing love. We can choose hate. We can choose fear. We can choose anger. But choosing *love* is the hallmark of those who follow Jesus. My aunt had a pillow on which she'd embroidered some words I thought were very wise: "Love is a *decision*." *And it is*. We decide to be loving, to walk as Jesus walked. It's a choice we make; maybe *the* most important choice we make. It is a choice that runs counter to a world that values success, competition, power, and wealth. There is a Shaker song with the words: "Love is little. Love is low. Love will make our spirits grow. Grow in peace, grow in light, Love will do the thing that's right." I learned this song when our dulcimer group sang it, and at first the opening words puzzled me. "Love is little?" "Love is low?" Then I realized it was a *Shaker* song, and the

Shakers are a devout group of Christians known for their counter-cultural lifestyle that emphasizes humility and simplicity. The words recognize that love isn't about making a big, attention getting splash and putting on a show. No, love is little, it is low, it is simple, it is humble. Choosing this kind of love is something that all of us do, as followers of Jesus, including our two confirmands this morning.

These words Jesus speaks about love are a part of the portion of John's Gospel that is called The Farewell Discourse by Biblical scholars. It is a rather lengthy section in which Jesus speaks to his disciples during the Last Supper. Knowing that his death awaits, he is giving a kind of farewell address and some final words of advice, encouragement, and command. Although he is celebrating a sacred Jewish meal, the Passover, with his close friends, the disciples, it is *not* a happy occasion. He knows that arrest, torture, and death loom. Immediately prior to these verses, Jesus has instituted the Lord's Supper, then he has washed his disciple's feet in a gesture of utter servitude and humility, giving an example he hopes they will follow. The first verse in our lesson reads, "When he had gone out, Jesus said" Who is the "he" who went out and where did he go? It was Judas who went out, and he went to betray his Master into the hands of the Roman guard. Jesus knows this full well, and in fact has said to Judas as he leaves, "Go and do as you will." Knowing that in allowing Judas to leave, he is signing his own death sentence.

So, immediately behind these words in today's lesson lies a bitter betrayal, and quickly to follow these words lies arrest, torture, and execution on the cross. Jesus speaks these words with a knife in his back and a hangman's noose in front of him, so to speak. Nothing cozy, flowery, or sweet about the context at all. And that, of course, is what makes these words so remarkable and what sets *this* love apart from all the love talk we hear and make every day. *This* is love in the midst of betrayal, abandonment, and fear. *This* is love chosen when evil seems to hold sway. This is love that is strong, unsentimental, and courageous. This is the gold standard of love, the love of God for us in Christ. That's what makes Jesus preface this commandment by saying, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another." Because the commandment to love one another is not actually *new* to Christ, is it? Repeatedly in the Old Testament we are commanded to love one another, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to show love to strangers and the needy. In fact, most world

religions and systems of ethics hold up loving others as a primary value. But what is *new* about this commandment is the way it is framed by the actions preceding it and following it; particularly the foot washing at the last supper which precedes this commandment and the death on the cross on Good Friday that follows it. Foot washing is truly an example of humble love. How often do we willingly wash the feet of another, particularly of another like the disciples, grown men with calloused feet wearing sandals in a dusty environment? And dying on the cross is truly an example of self-sacrificing love---dying a shameful and painful undeserved death willingly for the sake of others. The extent and depth of God's love, God's willingness to give God's all for our sake; that's what makes this commandment new. *This* is the kind of love we are commanded to have for one another.

Although Jesus speaks these words in today's text prior to his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection, we usually hear them in this now, in this time after Easter. So, we know the end of the story, we *know* that love wins over evil and hate when Christ is raised. Accordingly, one Lutheran seminary professor, Pastor Caroline Lewis, has suggested that the appropriate life motto for post-Easter people like ourselves would be: *choose love*. Choose love when it's hard. Choose love when evil seems to be winning. Choose love in the midst of betrayal, abandonment, and fear. Not the kind of love we tend to encounter in glitzy media portrayals, but *real love*, the love of God, the love that is little and is low, but can make our spirits grow.

To choose love as our life motto may mean leaving other mottos unchosen. We may not know we even have a life motto, but I'm guessing we all do; others may recognize it in us more than we do in ourselves. Jesus suggests that others will know us as Christians by our life mottos, *if* that motto involves choosing love. He states, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." To choose love is something Jesus asks of us, and not only *asks* of us, but *commands* us. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you."

If we obey this commandment and embrace this life motto of choosing love, where does that lead us? Looking around, we can easily see how the love we receive and give makes a difference. A placard I see in one

of the residences I have regularly visited reads: “Be Kind. Everyone you meet today is fighting a hard battle.” Perhaps not absolutely everyone, but a surprising number are fighting hard battles, sometimes including us or ours. Life *is* difficult at times, and whether or not we can see it, most people, like ourselves, are dealing with significant challenges. Which means that expressions of love and kindness are certainly a way to obey Jesus’ command. Often people dealing with grief or illness are especially aware in their vulnerability of the *difference* that the kindness and patience of others around them make. The staff in a nursing home; the medical professionals in a hospital; the neighbor who brings food or provides a ride. Those kinds of little, low expressions of love matter hugely.

We know, as followers of Jesus, that living out choosing love happens in the little battle trenches of our own daily reality. Not saying the angry, harsh word that wants to be said. Listening again to the same story our loved one with dementia has told us numerous times today already. Sitting at the bedside of a sick child. Reading that same child a bedtime story when we’re exhausted ourselves and just want to be done. Volunteering at the food shelf or serving food at a funeral when we’d rather be home with our feet up. Working in the church garden or food shelf garden or our neighbor’s garden when our own garden could use some attention. Trying to understand a point of view that seems utterly beyond understanding, rather than judging. Maybe it’s in a lot of those little choices that we make the big choice of choosing love as our life’s guiding motto. All of us, as Christians, commit to seeking to choose love. And that’s what you are doing this morning, McKinley and Sadie, as you confirm your faith. You are choosing to follow Jesus, to love and be loved, to remain a part of this community of faith we call the Church. Whether that be this church or another, in the years to come.

Do any of us, as *individuals*, fully succeed in choosing love? No, it’s not humanly possible. Does that make God love us any less? Absolutely not! God’s love is a given, God’s claim on us is unrelenting and unbreakable.

Do we together, as a *church*, fully succeed in choosing love? Again, no; we're the sum of the individual strengths and brokenness of our parts. Does that mean God can't work through us for good? Absolutely not! God does great things through us anyway, because that's how God is. Which means that the church is far from perfect, but it is still a blessed place of love and acceptance. There is room and a place for everyone here. And that's really an important truth I hope that our confirmands will claim: Sadie and McKinley, there is a place for you here, whatever happens in the times to come. This is a place for you of welcome and belonging, not of judgment or condemnation. We hope you continue as active, confirmed members here, in whatever venue best suits you. You're not graduating from church; you're committing to continuing a journey of faith exploration, or growing in the grace of God, and of choosing love. May you, and all of us, grow in the love of Jesus. Amen.