

Confirmation Sermon 2023  
Come Holy Spirit Come  
June 4, 2023  
Christ Church Cranbrook  
Kirking of the Tartan  
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

Come Holy Spirit and Enkindle within us the fire of your burning love. Amen.

Good Morning!

[This weekend I will have the opportunity to confirm and receive more than 80 people. With this in mind, I thought I'd offer you some of my thoughts on the sacrament of confirmation.]

I have mixed emotions about confirmation and find it ironic that a significant portion of my call as a bishop is confirming people.

I was confirmed when I was 12 years old. I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade at St. Louis Catholic School in Alexandria, VA. We had religion class every day and I enjoyed the classes. I liked the discussions we had, even though I had many more opinions than perhaps my teachers wanted to hear.

But confirmation preparation seemed rote, kind of "canned" like we were doing a thing for someone else. Maybe it felt like preparing for a standardized test, instead of pursuing knowledge for the joy of it. We memorized the gifts of the Holy Spirit: Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge, Piety, Fortitude, Counsel, and Fear of God. All of which seemed vague, obscure and kind of made up.

Except for the gift of: *the fear of God*. That one just seemed confusing. "If God is love, why should we be afraid of God...? Why is it a gift for me to be afraid of God? Why would I want to have a fear of God?" It all seemed counter-intuitive and sadly my teachers were unable to give me an answer that didn't feel as if their reasoning were being guided by a pretzel maker.

So, we committed this stuff to memory and we prepped for the bishop.

I'd never seen or met a bishop before. I knew they were "*special*". My dad was an officer in the Marine Corps so I understood about hierarchy and I had an idea where a bishop was in the church hierarchy. I also knew that he wore an odd-looking hat.

Our teachers told us that the bishop might ask us questions and they made it clear that it would be a poor reflection on us and them if we didn't have appropriate answers for the bishop. We rehearsed for the service and worried ourselves silly about the part where it was rumored that after laying hands on our head and saying prayers, the bishop would then lightly slap our faces. Why you ask?

The Catholic catechism says, The Bishop lightly slaps the newly confirmed, *"To make [them] recollect that, as a valiant combatant, he [we] should be prepared to endure with unconquered spirit all adversities for the name of Christ."* (Roman Catechism: Part II, Confirmation).

Supposedly, this part of the confirmation rite was dropped after Vatican II, but apparently 15 years later, word still hadn't reached the Roman Catholic Diocese of Arlington.

But what I remember, most vividly in all of our preparation, is the teacher being very clear with me, in front of the whole class when she said, "Bonnie this is a dress up event. Wear a dress and wear pantyhose, no knee socks."

(All I can tell you is that I have knee socks on right now.)

The bishop came, we sat through a long service, we went up one by one, the bishop prayed over me, tapped my cheek and I returned to my seat, having a sense that nothing terribly remarkable had happened. And I was miserable because I was wearing pantyhose and it was going to be at least another 45 minutes before I got to take them off.

Was I too young? If I had been older might the ritual have meant more to me? Perhaps.

Thirteen years later, at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, in Teaneck NJ, I stood before another bishop and was received into the Anglican Communion. This event meant much more to me. I was making an adult profession of faith, I was leaving the Roman Catholic Church, I had come out as a lesbian, I was embracing Christianity in the Anglican tradition. I was a senior in seminary and hoping, praying and longing to be an Episcopal priest. After the service I had a sense that I had both, left my childhood and found my way home.

You might wonder, well now that you do spend a significant portion of your liturgical time receiving and confirming people what do I think of it now?

First and foremost, I live in fear that I am boring some young person, and wrecking their sense of God's call because I haven't figured out how to convey clearly that they are, that you are exquisitely made in God's image and likeness. And that God longs for you, loves you and treasures you, exactly as you are, no changes needed, with all your doubts, uncertainties, fears and hopes. All of you. I worry if I am unable to offer this sense of enfolding care, that some of you will walk away from this service, feeling underwhelmed and bored.

Secondly, I want you all to know how honored and excited I am to be here with you. I want to offer to you, what I wish that Bishop had said to me, more than 48 years ago.

I am grateful that all of you are here today. I take none of you for granted. I am so happy that God is active in your life stirring your soul in such a way that you found your way here, to make a public declaration of your faith. I am honored to be the person you will face as you say with your presence, to this entire community gathered, that you long for God, and that you feel the tender touch of God in your life.

Know that the stirring you feel is real. The longing for God, to know God and be known by God, is confirmation of God's presence. Know too that by being you, you have all you need to make a difference in our world in the lives of people you know. Know that God loves you as you are and will invite you only to grow into being more of who you are now.

We are in a polarized time, a particularly contentious time in our country. We are in a time of impending change in our church. A time when we who claim to be followers of Christ are being called to embody Jesus' love overtly. There is way too much pain in our communities for us to continue being vaguely Christian. It is time for us to say in our actions, how we use our money, how we determine priorities in our lives, it is time for us to show in all we do, that we know that God in the person of Jesus, deeply treasures and loves everyone: Young people, old people, people who look like you, people who look nothing at all like you, people who grew up in this country, people who did not, people who vote like you, people who vote the opposite of you, people who need financial resources, people who do not, people who have spiritual gifts, people who do not, people who have power to alter our systems of governance, people who do not, people who have special flags, people who do not, people who are queer, people who are not, people who are non-binary and people who have no idea what that means.

We who are Christians, we who will make public professions of faith today and those of us here also filled with decades of doubt, all of us are being called by God in the person of Jesus to do our very best to welcome, love, care for, learn from and be changed by everyone with whom we come in contact. Today. We are called to be people who respect the dignity of every human being every single day.

You are blessed and we are blessed by you. I can hardly wait to see what God is calling all of us to do together. Come Holy Spirit come. Amen.