
Are we there yet?
Wesley Mimico United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 15:21-28

I read recently that after decades of research into human physiology, kinesiology, biofeedback techniques, symptomatic responses to internally induced stressors, it has been determined - scientifically - to 4 decimal places that getting a gym membership does not make you fit, unless you actually go to the gym. And even more amazingly - going to the gym has no positive impact on fitness levels if you don't do any work while you are there. Amazing what scientists are discovering these days. Sometimes, membership - by itself - is not enough to bring transformation. As I read that this week, I wondered if there were any teachings for the church in that story.

Particularly today, as we have celebrated Ivy's confirmation. Ivy is now a full member of this congregation. And so it is reasonable to ask what the value of church membership is. What sort of accomplishment is confirmation? Because in life, we have many accomplishments. And some accomplishments are like the final step in a journey, while other accomplishments are like one more step on a continuing journey. It's like the difference between graduating from high school - and getting your driver's license.

When you finish high school, you graduate. Many people never return to their high schools after graduation. School is the sort of activity that for most of us has an ending. You can actually finish school. A high school diploma is - among other things - your ticket *out* of high school.

But when you get your driver's license, it's different. You may have attended classes while you were learning to drive, and you likely won't return to those classrooms again, but every time you get behind the wheel of a car, you continue to learn about driving. At least, I hope you do. That's because there is so much about driving that you can't learn in a few months, and there are things that you can't learn from a book or a teacher. There are things about driving that you can only learn from experience. A

driver's license is - among other things - your ticket to keep learning how to drive.

So, Ivy, how do you view your confirmation today? Is it a ticket out of the church, or is it a license to keep growing. A license to continue to explore your faith and your spiritual life journey - but now, as a full member of this congregation? That's a choice you get to make. And if confirmation is like a driver's license, what is it that you get to practice? What part of life and faith is equivalent to "getting behind the wheel" in a car? In what ways can you continue to grow and develop in your faith?

But I don't want Ivy to feel that we are only focused on her today. If we agree that confirmation is a ticket to continue on your journey of faith within a congregation ... then I want to encourage Ivy to continue on her path. And the way that I want to encourage her is to invite each of us to share stories of what being in a congregation has meant to us over the years. What have you done with your own confirmation? Where have you travelled on your own journey of faith? And if we have visitors here today, I ask the question in the most open way possible so we can all engage. Why are you glad to be in the church?

[discussion]

For me, personally, I prefer a different transportation analogy for confirmation. I think of being on a life-long journey of faith - on a bicycle. And confirmation is the equivalent to taking off your training wheels. Prior to confirmation, through Sunday School and other activities, people are invited to learn about Christianity in controlled ways. But at confirmation, you lose your training wheels and are now invited into a journey where you decide which path you will follow, you decide if you want to pedal or coast. And ultimately, you are allowed to fall off, because learning how to get back on is a part of all real journeys.

I'm reminded of a story. A mother asks her daughter what she learned in Sunday School that day. The daughter says, "Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. When

Moses got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge, and all the people walked across safely. Then, Moses used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters and call in an air strike. They sent in bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Hebrew people were saved.” The mother said, “Now Suzie, is that really what your teacher taught you?” And Suzie replied, “Well, no, Mom, but if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!”

Confirmation is a license to keep searching - to read and re-read our stories of faith and to retell them in ways that make sense to us. Like Suzie, we can explore new ways of telling our stories of faith, ways that we find more helpful, more compelling. And in the telling, we can tell the story of our own faith and life journeys. And we can share those stories with each other - in communities like this one right here.

Take a look at the photo on the bulletin cover. It's a picture I took when I was on a sailing trip to the Bustard Islands in Georgian Bay. The picture is taken on Gooseberry Island, looking roughly north. I have a question: what does the picture make you think of? Are you drawn to the land as a place you might want to stay, or are you drawn to the water as a way to continue a journey to somewhere else?

The land is nice. It's rugged - but it is obviously a shelter from the wind - just look how calm the water is. And if you can make out the details of the vegetation, you would expect that the land even provides food - at least wild blueberries, but perhaps other delights. Having been there, I can tell you that it would be a great spot to stay. You could live and be quite comfortable on that land.

And what about the water? You can just make out the channels between the nest of islands. But you can also see hints of underwater hazards waiting for your keel or your propeller. The water is calm, and clear. Just to the west is a larger channel that huge cruisers pass through. The water is clear enough to drink, but murky enough that you can expect to find fish. You could live on that water.

So - does this photo make you think about putting down roots, or pulling up the anchor and leaving? That's a choice you get to make frequently in life. Does the picture make you think of a destination, or a continuing journey? Personally, I think I'd stay put

until I was sick of blueberries, and then I'd leave. But who knows - it looks like a nice day for sailing. Sometimes, what we think is a destination is in fact just a continuation of a journey. Would you stay or would you go?

In our gospel reading today, Jesus is struggling with the same question. Jesus struggles with deciding whether he is at a destination or on a journey. The story happens somewhere in the middle of Jesus's public ministry. Jesus is well enough known that people are drawn to him, but it is still fairly early in his ministry of traveling around, teaching and healing.

The way the story is written suggests that Jesus understood the nature of his own ministry. He knew who he was. He knew what he had been called to do. Jesus had a vision of ministry, but only - in his words - "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". He was so sure of this that he initially ignored the existence of the woman in the story. Jesus thought he was at a destination, at a known place. At a place where everything made sense. Jesus had everything figured out. Or at least he thought he did.

But the encounter between Jesus and the woman changed that. In this story, Jesus redefines his own sense of ministry. He does not throw away his ministry, or his understanding of ministry. He does not start again from scratch. But he changes and broadens his vision of ministry to include people he had thought of as outsiders. In this story, Jesus comes to realize that his faith is still in motion - it is still a work in progress. He does not have it all figured out after all. Jesus is still on an expanding journey.

And if Jesus was on a continuing and changing journey of faith, I doubt that any of us have reached a final destination. We can imagine we have arrived only if we close our eyes to new possibilities. Otherwise, we are faced with the reality that the question "Are we there yet?" is always answered with "No, not yet".

Our journeys of discovery and faith are not over. Ivy, we are delighted that you have joined with us on our continuing journeys. Welcome to the conversation!

Amen.