

Inducted into the Hall of Faith

1 John 4 (excerpts)

I want to again welcome all the families and guests who are here today to help celebrate and be witnesses to the vows our youth will make as they are confirmed.

Before this day of celebration, we met with these six youth three times to talk about our church's approach to confirmation, what it means and its link to baptism. At our first gathering I just had to give them a T/F quiz about confirmation—just for me to get a baseline measure of their knowledge of confirmation. Let's see how you all do on some of these statements and youth—don't give away the answers:

(slides)

True or False. The phrase "rite of confirmation" can be found in the Bible.

True or False. You must have the correct beliefs about Christianity before being confirmed.

True or False. It's very important that you have all the books of the bible memorized before being confirmed.

True or False. Each new youth who is confirmed is placed on probationary status for 6 months.

True or False. The central gesture underlying confirmation is laying on of hands for the person being initiated into the church.

What we celebrate today is the life of faith—the life of faith that you have discovered and that you continue to be curious about and seek. And we celebrate your decision to become members of this church community-- As this church has said "yes" to you – you now are willing to say "yes" to the church.

So, for today, it seems right and good that we focus on the signature message that is central to our Christian faith. And this signature message is simple and true—God loves us without condition, without demand, without any requirements attached.

Jesus' purpose on earth, before his death, through his death, and after his resurrection, was to communicate this message with the hope that we would have faith in this message, in God's love for us. This passage from 1 John couldn't say it any stronger. In fact, the word *love* appears 27 times in 15 verses. The author of First John, couldn't communicate it any more convincingly--the essence of the Divine is pure, nonviolent love. And our best picture of that love is lived out in Jesus.

Now perhaps knowing that some might find this message too simple to be true, Jesus spent a lot of his ministry helping to create faith in this love. He was doing something so that we could believe.

Effectively Jesus was saying, “I know that you might find it very difficult to believe that the essence of God is nonviolent love and that God loves you. So what I want to do is to try and nudge you into being able to trust that the God who brought you and everything into being is actually trustable and not out to get you. You can believe God. You can believe me. I am going to act out in such a way as to make it possible for you to believe—I am going to prove God’s trustworthiness for you.” And this is what Jesus does. (James Allison, *The Forgiving Victim*)

So then our faith is not about trying to believe 17 impossible things before signing on. Our faith is not about how good we are or how right we are. Our faith is born out of a story that was given to us—a story about how loved we are. And to help us consider this I want to share with you two stories—or more accurately, one personal experience and one metaphor—that can help us see this love defined.

A few years ago, I helped with the Solo and Ensemble Festival at Memorial High School. I was assigned to be a room monitor and gather the score sheets to give to the door monitor. Basically, I had the luxury of listening to 20 youth perform either a solo or ensemble on their brass instrument. It was very enjoyable. But what was very inspiring to me was watching and listening to how the judge interacted and responded to each participant after their performance. He had this way with the youth that was deeply heartwarming and instructive to witness.

Most of the youth who came in to perform were nervous. I’m sure they didn’t know what the judge would be like—would he be nice, or would he be tough, would he be critical?

After each performance the judge would either invite them back to his table or he would go up front where they were. He would begin to talk with them in a very positive, affirming way and the youth would start to relax and enjoy the conversation. He would often ask them to play a part over again and because they were more relaxed, they were able to play it even better. They were relaxed because they trusted him. With each student he would give very positive and affirming suggestions—in essence he was inducting faith in them that they could play and they could play well. He believed in them.

Of all the performances I saw that day, there was only one youth who really struggled to play his piece. He stopped about 10 times and said his lips were chapped or something else was bothering him. I came to the quick and smug conclusion that he was simply not prepared and that he was trying to give excuses for his lack of preparation.

I was immediately humbled, however, by what the judge did in response to this student. The judge responded to this youth the same way he did with all the others. He didn’t challenge the youth about his excuses, he didn’t demean him or shame him. The judge stayed positive and light-hearted with him. He believed in

this young man's ability to be a musician just like he believed in all the others. He inducted faith in him. I was deeply touched and humbled by what I witnessed that day.

A second way to help us understand how God's love for us can be believed is for us to consider how we learned to walk. And I thought we'd have a little fun by looking at some photos of our six youth we are honoring today and peek at when they took their first steps. (slides)

I wanted to include these photos because I'm going to talk about how we learned to walk as a metaphor for understanding the love of God. And I credit James Allison who wrote *The Forgiving Victim* who provides this helpful metaphor.

When you were an infant there were adults all around you. And from a very early age, and long before you could do things for yourself, you saw adults walking on two legs. Then there came a time when adults started to help you learn to walk. Let's remember that at this early stage, you did not have the muscles yet to walk nor did you have any theoretical understanding of how it was one day going to be possible.

I don't think any of your parents sat down with you before you could walk and first explained to you the theory of ambulatory locomotion—of putting one foot in front of the other.

So, you did not know that it was possible that you could walk but your parents and other adults did. Little by little, the loving adults in your life started helping you by holding your hands and leading you. You would take a few steps and then you would fall down, and then an adult would help you up again and this pattern would repeat itself over and over again.

All along, the adult would be looking into your eyes sending you the clear message that they believed in your ability to walk. And sure enough, after a certain time, your muscles began to acquire the density that they would need to walk. So then your parent was able to stand back a bit as you were able to take more and more steps. And then "click" you got it! You were off! And everyone cheered! Walking became second nature to you, something completely reliable and trustworthy. (James Allison, *The Forgiving Victim*)

What those loving adults did for you was nourish you and love you into learning how to walk!

And this, my friends, is the point of the gift of faith. We have a God who gives us the disposition to trust God's love and then gives to us the ability to relax fully in that love. Faith is not something we earn or try and get right with the correct beliefs. It comes to us as a gift. And as we grow in trusting God's unrivaled love for us, we find ourselves becoming someone more than we knew ourselves to be.

For just as your parents did not induct you into the habit of walking so that you would thereafter follow your parents around and do exactly what the parents do, so God who produces in us the gift of faith doesn't do this to control us or have us "behave properly." Rather, God who seeks to give you faith is completely trustworthy, someone who is not concerned with the inevitable mistakes you will make, someone who knows that perfectionism is the enemy of learning and growth.

But instead, this God wants you to receive this gift of faith, experience the joy of being loved without condition, and then relax in this love that is all about making us free. There is no better love than this.

Finally, the role of this faith community has been to live into the promises that they made when you were baptized. They promised to love, care, and support you as you have grown up in this Christian community. They too have helped to induct you into a faith that is grounded in our tradition's origin story that God is love. Most of you have been in this church since the day you were born.

All of you have been a part of this church community for over 10 years. (slide) A few years ago, we had a panel discussion with our youth where they shared with us, the congregation, what the challenges and joys are of being a youth in today's world. One question we asked of them was what they appreciated about this community. And they said what they appreciated most was the unconditional love and acceptance they felt. They felt believed in and affirmed. And as they experienced this, God's love was being made real to them.

There is no underestimating the power of this love that the youth experienced and how it transformed their lives. And I hope that this is what you know to be true here too.

This is what we celebrate today. We have been given the gift of faith. And this gift comes from the One who is completely trustworthy and reliable. This is the One who completely has your back. So then, Josie, Jadyn, Josie, John, Amalia, and Zane, relax in this pure love, taking one step at a time and see what happens. Amen.