

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush  
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA 22310  
May 1, 2011  
CONFIRMATION SUNDAY

Acts 2:14a, 22–32  
John 20:19–31

## FULLY DEVOTED MATURE FOLLOWERS

I recently read about a fascinating exchange between a seminary student and a traditionally-informed theologian who had come to lecture at their campus. After the lecture the seminarian asked, “What can one do when one finds oneself unable to affirm certain parts of a confession?” (That’s the way seminarians speak: “What would *one* do?”) The theologian answered, “Well, you start out by just saying it. And it’s not that hard to master. With a little bit of time and a little bit of effort you can learn to say that confession by heart.”

The seminarian felt misunderstood. And so he rephrased the question. “What can *I* do when *I* have difficulty affirming parts of a confession? Like, say, for instance, the virgin birth?” The theologian responded, “You just say it. You just say those parts you particularly have difficulty believing; you just say it and eventually it will come to you.”

Now the seminarian was completely frustrated. “How can I, with integrity, affirm a creed in which I do not believe?” And the theologian said, “It’s not *your* creed; it’s *our* creed. Eventually it may come to you. For some, it takes longer than others. It’s not *your* creed, it’s *our* creed *together*.”

Faith is not something that happens by going out and sitting under a tree by oneself. It’s not what happens by reading a theology book. Those things are good. And it’s even good to question what we believe in our creeds. But in a community of people who share faith—who profess faith in one Lord, I believe resurrection faith takes us to that place where community is more important than our individual struggle. Community is where forgiveness happens, where we support one another during times of grief, where we are inclusive even of those who get on our last nerve, where we welcome and celebrate at the fount and at this table.

You see, in the final analysis, faith isn’t a possession. Faith is always a gift. And it’s a gift that we receive in community—when we gather all our stories from the newest among us to the person with the most stories to tell. We gather those stories here. The reconciliation that Jesus accomplished on the cross becomes tangible. We experience forgiveness together. We worship God, and our stories interlock into something we call Good News for all who will receive it, for other people as well as for ourselves.

When we come together, it’s like we relax in the embrace of a loving, caring parent—a heavenly father who encourages us to respond joyously and with gratitude, and, yes, with obedience. That same spirit that was working with in Christ in the garden and on

the cross is at work in us. So when we come to church and all our scattered stories meet in one place just as they did a few moments ago as we heard confessions of faith, what is worthy of praise comes to the surface. And we witness—we give credit to God. We say that Jesus is equal to God. And then we go out to scatter again and those stories become flesh in the world.

So confirmands of all ages, not just those on the two front pews to my right, we are called to not only be forgiven and reconciled but to be forgiven and reconciling with one another. We're called to maturity which means becoming a reliable example of how to follow Jesus, to be more like Christ in our behavior. And if we devote ourselves to these activities, these behaviors and habits, we will find that being more like Christ happens in places where we least expect it. Sometimes it even happens at church. And we are in a place where others know that same love and acceptance we have experienced. It comes through communal practices; there's no question about it. It comes from watching and learning from one another both what to do and what not to do. And it comes from prayerful reflection that God will help us apply the truth of scripture in our decisions.

The problem comes when gathering stops being about sharing our scattered stories. I want to caution our confirmands that the longer you live in church the more you'll be tempted to listen to people who encourage us to play it safe, to not get carried away too far in believing in Jesus because that will just make some people uncomfortable. But Jesus never taught us to live that way. He never taught us to play it safe. That's not our goal or our purpose. Jesus wants our faith to produce fruit that will last. And the only thing, he says, that will really last is that genuine affection we share for God for one another and for those who are still coming into his family. Let us hold on to that which is lasting—the love we have received and are asked now to share. This is a time of invitation into discipleship: a time of rededication, a time to help us believe and confess that Jesus is in fact God, our Messiah, our Savior.

So let us worship.