

*The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham*

*"Excuses, Excuses"*

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Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

We all have our excuses.

Mine was that I wasn't nice enough. Believe it or not, that was my excuse for avoiding my call to ministry. All the pastors I knew were really nice. They cared about people, and it showed. And that just wasn't me. At least, that's what I told myself.

And yet, my friends were always coming to me with their problems. They asked me for advice. They found me to be helpful and, I suppose, nice enough.

So then I decided I didn't know enough. The pastors I knew, they knew everything about the Bible. They could talk about God like they were old buddies. I'd gone to Sunday school and listened to some sermons, but I didn't know God that well. Not like a pastor is supposed to know God.

And yet, friends would come to me with their theological questions and quandaries. They'd come looking for help in seeing God's activity in the world and seeking God's guidance in their lives. I seemed to be the religious phone-a-friend in my community.

And so one day, I dusted off the Bible my grandmother had given me when I went to college. I opened the front cover, and inside she'd written 1 Corinthians 13:12. I couldn't recollect this passage, and it seemed as good a place as any to start reading. So I went to the Bible's index (because I hadn't done Bible drills in a while) to look up 1 Corinthians, and I found the passage, and I read "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

And at that moment, it hit me full force like a blow to the head that I was going to seminary. No more excuses. I didn't need to mull it over or meditate on this passage or talk to friends and mentors. I knew what this passage was saying to me, and I could no more avoid it or talk my way out of it than Jeremiah could shirk his duty as a prophet with his "I don't know how to speak - I'm just a boy" excuse.

Up to this point, I hadn't been seeing clearly. My excuses were formed out of a dim reflection of who I was. I couldn't see myself in ministry, but that was because I couldn't really see myself at all. I didn't know everything I needed to know, but that was okay. It was appropriate, in fact. We "know only in part." Somewhere down the line, I might know fully, but that was no excuse to sit around and wait for that day to come. Someone knew me fully, and that Someone was calling me to go to seminary.

Now, this is no proper exegetical, theological, or even pastoral interpretation of this passage. To some degree, I can't really tell you why this snippet of scripture affected me so powerfully and changed the course of my life. It was a moment of deep spiritual knowing that is difficult to put into words.

And yet, I have tried to tell this story, again and again. On my seminary application. Through the ordination process. And to all the people who ask, with great curiosity, “how did you go from being an actress to being a minister?”

It’s not a great story. There’s not a lot of drama. No major life events or exciting action. The main character isn’t particularly interesting. But it’s all I’ve got. Excuses, pushed aside by the mysterious movement of the Spirit.

And while my story may not be terribly exciting, it echoes the stories we hear in scripture. The story of Jeremiah, his excuses pushed aside by the Word of God. The story of the Corinthian church, embroiled in conflict and division, filled with excuses. “We feel foolish talking about this Jesus stuff.” “We need a sign.” “We can’t agree on who to follow.” “We’re having trouble telling right from wrong in this new faith.” “We’re arguing over which spiritual gifts are the best.”

And Paul pushes aside their excuses with love. Love, patiently and kindly working through disagreements. Love, standing in stark contrast to all their childish behavior, their envy and boasting and arrogance and rudeness. Love, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things.

This love is the beginning and ending of all our stories of faith. It shapes the narrative we teach in Sunday school here, the narrative that forms the foundation of our Confirmation curriculum. It’s the story of how God loves the world. How the world wandered far from God. How Jesus is the way to God. How the Spirit leads us to God. And how we follow the way of God’s love.

Through this story, our Confirmands have learned to tell their own stories. Each of them composed statements of faith that wove elements of our larger story of faith into their own experiences.

While many of our Confirmands’ stories expressed a deep sense of commitment to following the way of God’s love, to following the call of God on their lives, many of them also included excuses. Teenagers, after all, are professionals when it comes to making excuses. I remember I once told my mom I couldn’t go to school one day because I’d left my makeup at a friend’s house and couldn’t possibly show my face to the entire middle school without it.

Our Confirmands, in their faith stories, expressed a variety of excuses. “I need more facts, more evidence.” “I don’t feel God’s presence in my life.” “I don’t understand why God lets bad things happen in the world.” “I have too many questions and doubts.” “I’m selfish or judgmental.” “Sometimes I’m mean.”

Honestly and authentically, they shared their excuses, their struggles to follow the call of God on their lives.

But this was only one part of their stories. Overwhelmingly, they expressed this understanding that they are only seeing in a mirror dimly. They realize that they know only in part. They trust that someone knows them fully. They trust that God believes in them even when they’re not sure they believe in God.

In their stories, the Confirmands talked about trusting in Love, even if they weren't sure they could call that Love by the name God. They talked about God calling Jeremiah and giving him the words to share God's love, even when he was unsure of himself. They shared how they are following the way of God's love, and how they intend to keep following – serving those in need, participating in the ministry of this church, opening their hearts and minds to continue to grow in faith.

In other words, they aren't letting their excuses get in the way. Despite their doubts, their questions, their excuses, they are committing themselves to sharing the hope that is in them, to following the path God has set for them, and to loving as God has loved them. As they profess their faith and are welcomed in to adult membership in the church, they are putting an end to their childish ways, their teenage excuses, to accept the responsibility to love and serve and follow God with a faith that is still young and fresh and vulnerable.

So if these 17 teenagers can do this, the rest of us really have no excuse. I said earlier that teenagers are experts in making excuses. But I'm not entirely sure that's true. We really learn to hone this skill as adults. "Busy" is our favorite excuse. It covers everything and is irrefutable. Another excuse we love is "you know, that's just not my gift." This excuse is as old as Moses. Literally. We tell ourselves that someone else will take care of it, that it's not my place to get involved, that things will work out eventually. We have lots of great excuses.

But for those of us who were privileged to hear our Confirmands share their faith statements on Wednesday night, all those excuses were pushed aside. The love they expressed in their stories – love for family, for strangers in need, for this church, and for God – that love brought us face to face with God's call on our lives once again. That call to share the hope of Christ that is within us, that call to journey with each other in faith, that call to teach and learn and grow, and most of all, that call to love.

One Confirmand shared that she's not certain about her belief in God. But she is sure that she believes in love. And for now, that might be enough. As she, and the other Confirmands, continue in membership here, they may learn to connect that love to the name of God. But for now, believing in love is enough.

Our challenge as a congregation is to keep walking alongside these young people, wondering and searching, longing and striving, serving and caring. No "I'm too busy right now," or "working with teens is not my gift." We are called by God, and we are promising today, to support, guide and nurture, pray for and encourage our Confirmands. Most of all, we are committing to loving them. With patience, kindness, humility and honesty. We will love them. No excuses. Amen.