

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Own Your Hope: Something You Can Count On”
Rev. Amy Morgan
May 18, 2014

[Psalm 66:8-20, 1 Peter 3:13-22](#)

I’m going to start with one of John Judson’s “survey says” questions. Raise your hand if you are, or ever have been, a teenager.

So, it looks like most of us can empathize with the teenage experience. For those of us for whom this is a distant memory, I want you to take just a minute to put yourself back to your 14-year-old self. What did you long for at that age? What did you wonder about and question? What did you worry about or fear?

One study found that mothers of 14-year-old girls are statistically the most unhappy people on the planet. And there’s a very good reason for that. Being 14 years old might just be the very definition of suffering.

By the age of 14, teens are smack in the middle of the three P’s of adolescent misery: Puberty, Popularity, and Parents.

Their bodies are undergoing all kinds of uncomfortable, unmanageable, and, frankly, embarrassing changes. They don’t know how to move in their bodies, how to hold themselves. Their discomfort is on display for all the world to see as their skin breaks out and voices crack. I remember feeling betrayed by my body as it grew and behaved in ways I couldn’t control.

And all this happens at a time when popularity becomes the most important thing in our lives. As teens begin to develop their own identity, they do so in the context of their social relationships. They want to identify with a group of peers. And since human egocentrism is at its apex in middle adolescence, they want those peers to like them, to affirm their new identity. The really sad part is, no matter how “popular” a teen might be, popularity still contributes to suffering. Teens suffer because they are unpopular or don’t fit in with their peer group. But teens also suffer because they *are* popular, because they have a persona or reputation to maintain that is often unrealistic or simply too static for the dynamic process of identity formation. So where popularity is concerned, no one wins. Everyone is miserable.

As much as parents try to love and nurture their children through this challenging time, it is a certainty that they will contribute to the suffering of adolescence. Teens push against boundaries and family identity and obligations as they grow into independent young adults. Meanwhile, parents are stewards of these unwilling captives and responsible for steering them toward healthy and life-giving choices. Friction, conflict, and sometimes outright hostility seem to be an inevitable part of any parent-teen relationship.

And so it is at this tender age that we invite them into the Confirmation journey. As a church community, we offer to walk alongside them in their suffering. We share our faith stories with them, and we listen to their stories. We teach them, encourage, support and guide them, but we also “demand an accounting for the hope that is in them.”

This hope looks different for each and every person, and the variety we hear in the Confirmands’ faith statements reflects that diversity. This year’s Confirmation class has truly wrestled with their faith. Some students struggled to reconcile religion and scientific inquiry while others were challenged by friends who expressed a lack of faith. They found God in the beauty of creation and the love of family and friends, through God-given abilities and even our very existence. They questioned who Jesus is and what his death and resurrection meant. They felt the Holy Spirit at work in them in times of struggle and doubt, in discernment of right and wrong, in moments of surprising courage and strength, and in insights and inspiration. Some of them are confident in the next steps of their faith journeys while others aren’t sure what’s next. We are truly blessed this year to have a Confirmation class that has expressed their faith with raw honesty. Their statements of faith are full of wonder and longing, challenge and hope.

Maybe requiring them to write faith statements, demanding an accounting for the hope that is in them, only contributes to the suffering of adolescence, but I think there is a redeeming outcome. In making an accounting for their hope, in articulating their faith, our Confirmands are able to claim a hope they can count on.

Our text today from 1 Peter talks about accounting for our hope, but it also talks about counting on our hope.

The end of the passage has this strange bit about Jesus making a proclamation to the “spirits in prison,” referencing those who were wiped out in the great flood. Noah and his family were saved (along with the animals, of course), which, the writer says, prefigures God’s saving grace in baptism. This passage has been challenging for scholars to interpret, and there are at least 4 theories about what exactly it means. However, the underlying takeaway is that the hope we have in Christ is more powerful than death or sin. There is nothing we can do, and there is no power in the universe, that can diminish or destroy God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. If Christ

can bring the good news of the gospel to the most sinful and dead people, is there anyone Jesus cannot claim and make his own?

This is good news for teens, and for their parents, and for all of us. When we are in the depths of our suffering - whether it be the suffering of adolescence or the suffering of parenting an adolescence, the suffering of illness or grief or shame, the suffering of what we have done or the suffering of what has been done to us – no matter what our suffering may be, we have hope in the God who has saved us through the waters of baptism. Baptism invites us to perceive our lives through a new lens, from a broader perspective. We endure suffering by connecting to a larger purpose and meaning, something greater than that which oppresses us. And so, in baptism, we're invited to step out of that ego-centric 14-year-old we never quite grow out of in order to experience, through the lens of Jesus Christ, our intrinsic value to God, who, as one Confirmand wrote, "showed his undying love for us by sacrificing part of himself."

The young people who will be Confirmed this morning are confirming the vows made on their behalf by their parents in baptism. They are claiming for themselves a faith that, fragile and uncertain, confounding and mysterious as it may be, is a faith they can count on, a faith in a God of love, a faith full of hope and possibility.

"Baptism," our text tells us, "now saves you-- not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience." One of the best parts about our faith, and something our Confirmands connect with powerfully, is the fact that what we do, how we live, matters deeply. This class articulated a desire to live compassionate, generous lives, to show kindness, and to love others. A good conscience is a clear indicator for them of faithful living.

And our text this morning asks, "Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?" We all know that the truth is that we may suffer for doing good – for standing our ground against bullying or for setting boundaries as parents, for "rooting for the underdog," as one Confirmand pointed out Jesus did, or for living according to our values, though they may be different from the surrounding culture. But even in this suffering we are blessed because, as this text points out, "it is better to suffer for doing good than it is to suffer for doing evil."

Every year, when the Confirmands read their faith statements to the Session, adults in this congregation say to me, "that must have been so difficult for them! I'm not sure I could write a faith statement myself." Well, I can tell you, it is difficult for them. It takes a lot of courage, thought, time, and prayer to write a faith statement, especially when you are 14 or 15 years old. But what I hope our Confirmands have gained from accounting for the hope that is in them is a hope they can count on, in good times and bad, through joy and suffering.

I also would challenge any adult in this congregation to follow their lead. As we tell our Confirmands again and again, our faith continues to evolve over time. We learn and experience new things, and this impacts what we believe. So those of us who have escaped adolescence might have a different perspective to share. I am challenging any and all of you to compose your own statement of faith, to account for the hope that is in you. I have added a page on the church website that will guide you through the process we used with the Confirmands, and I am happy to meet with you and work with you through the journey. As our Confirmands will tell you, it's not easy. But I think you'll find it is worth it. Because accounting for your hope will give you a hope you can count on. Amen.