

EMBRACING THE CONFIRMATION CLASS OF 2009

May 1, 2010

To the Newest of My Friends,

Several months ago we sent you a letter asking you to let us invade your life. We asked you to give us your time and energy so that we may have an opportunity to shape your life's journey with our values and our vision. You, with the help of your parents, consented to let us have a "crack at it". So let me begin by saying "Thank you to each of you and thank you to your families".

Now allow me to clarify some things about the spiritual life. There are many ways to think about God and there are many wise and ancient faiths that have been tried and they have been found to convey eternal truths about what it means to be in right relationship with God, fellow human sojourners, the planet, and history itself. In themselves, and this includes Christianity and Shadow Rock's brand of Christian faith, these faiths are scandalous.

Let me explain what I mean. A scandal is a situation or event that causes public outrage. Religions are "scandals of particularity" that are trying to point beyond themselves to something universal. To attempt such an expression and to help human beings to connect to mystery and life's ultimate possibilities is a noble human endeavor. However, sometimes it can go very tragic.

Whenever the practitioners of any faith point to themselves or their particular faith as if it was ultimate and universal then they commit idolatry and usually slip into intellectual and physical violence. This is the "scandalous" part, but too few people are outraged or making their outrage public. We should never forget that all human expressions of faith are finite expressions of an infinite reality. Sometimes the finite expression can be as beautiful as Handel's Messiah or a Buddhist Sand Painting or Native American Flute Music. Sometimes the finite expressions of the infinite can be ugly and horrifying as denying simple human rights to all people or killing in the name of God. I encourage you to seek out the most beautiful human expressions of faith, hope, and love from all corners of the world, appreciate and allow yourself to be absorbed by their beauty, but never be silent when such expressions become exclusive, idolatrous, and violent.

Related to this concept, I also encourage you just as strongly to resist the tendency to raise up to idol status those things which give you the greatest sense of security. These things could include our nation, our economy, our ideology, our families, our own self will, and our own personal finite expressions of God. There is no such thing as certainty and absolute security. I am not encouraging an "absolute relativism" which means every idea is of equal value, therefore no idea has any value. I am encouraging "relative relativism" which means that some ideas are actually better than other ideas. Some ideas are more informed than other ideas. Some people have actually committed their lives to exploring certain ideas. It is okay to live with an ever-evolving "working definition" of God, just remember that it is for the purpose of defining and guiding,

and it is a process. There is not an absolute definition of reality. It is not helpful or life-giving to confine God. There is always someone out there with a better idea. Always be a seeker of new people and ideas, and remember that you can tell what kind of tree it is by the fruit it bears. This means that the ultimate test of new people and ideas is in the fruit of love, peace, and justice that they bear.

It might be nice to be entities of pure energy that float around the whole universe like clouds. Perhaps then we could live without definitions and boundaries but we are what we are and we are embodied spirits. We are living, breathing, walking scandals of particularity with infinity planted in the electrical and chemical processes of our brains. Our bodies are a metaphor for the great paradoxical relationship between the finite and the infinite, the creature and the creator, the spiritual and the physical. Our “working definitions” of God might be projections of our own explorations of the human spirit but then again, such “projections” might be works of the Spirit of Life and Love which may be at the heart of all existence. I believe in the latter because it explains more about the complexities and nuances about human existence. O my God, what a mystery and what an adventure.

Human existence; I do not know what it all means but I do believe that you are a part of the scandal. You have been baptized in the particular scandal of Christianity. For us, this means that God has a claim on you. When you were baptized the adults in your life took responsibility for your spiritual nurture, care, and development. The early followers of Jesus said, “When I was a child, I thought like a child, I felt like a child, and I acted like a child but when I became an adult I put childish ways behind me.” Confirmation is the ritual which transfers responsibility for your spiritual growth away from others and places it squarely on your shoulders. Does this feel like a weight or like the unfolding of a sail? This is scary and exciting at the same time so allow me to soften the blow just a little bit. It does not mean that you have arrived and that you don’t have any more potential. You have lots of potential. It does not mean that the adults in your life no longer have a role in your spiritual journey. You have lots of wise adults who care for you and will be there for you. However, it does mean that responsibility for your emotional and spiritual well being and the destiny of your life is beginning to shift away from others to you.

I know you are moving away from childhood to adulthood. You know this is true. One of the most important indicators is what do you do with the emotional pain of your life. There is an amazing photograph of Vietnamese children on a refugee boat. They had gone for days without food and water before they were finally allowed to dock at a foreign port. No food, no water, no home, separated from family, exposed to the sun and wind, and no idea where they were or where they were going. The amazing thing about the photo is that all of the children were smiling. They could suffer and move on without bitterness and resentment. This is an amazing child-like ability that we lose as we move into adulthood. As we grow into adulthood, our ability to “forgive and forget” diminishes, and the pain of our lives begins to shape and form what kind of person we will be. Perhaps this is part of what Jesus meant when he said “You must become like a child again in order to enter into the Realm of Love and Peace.” We have to learn how to “forgive and forget” the pain of our existence in order to live and love abundantly.

To love abundantly, and recklessly, and without counting the cost is the spiritual life. It is not about the doctrines of the trinity, the divinity and humanity of Jesus, or morality. These things

are particular finite expressions of the universal life of love. Again, hear the words of some initial believers.

*What if I could speak all languages of humans and of angels?
If I did not love others, I would be nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

*What if I could prophesy and understand all secrets and all knowledge?
And what if I had faith that moved mountains?
I would be nothing, unless I loved others.*

*What if I gave away all that I owned and let myself be burned alive?
I would gain nothing, unless I loved others.*

*Love is kind and patient, never jealous, boastful, proud, or rude.
Love isn't selfish or quick tempered. It doesn't keep a record
of wrongs that others do. Love rejoices in the truth, but not in evil.
Love is always supportive, loyal, hopeful, and trusting. Love never fails!*

Everyone who prophesies will stop, and unknown languages will no longer be spoken. All that we know will be forgotten. We don't know everything, and our prophecies are not complete. But what is perfect will someday appear, and what isn't perfect will then disappear. When we were children, we thought and reasoned as children do. But when we grew up, we quit our childish ways.

Now all we can see of God is like a cloudy picture in a mirror, it is the finite trying to grasp the infinite. Later we will see God face to face. We don't understand everything, but then we will, just as God completely understands us.

For now, there is faith, hope, and love. But let us never forget of these three, the greatest is love.

Your spiritual journey will ebb and flow. It will take many different twists and turns. You will have seasons of doubt as well as seasons of faith and trust. Sometimes the road signs on your journey will indicate joy and sometimes sorrow. But you will always have a place of sanctuary at Shadow Rock and you will have people at every campfire to welcome you.

Together we represent the Spirit of God to the world. You are an important part of our church family. Today we make official what is already a reality. We extend to you the hand of fellowship and the mantle of responsibility. Your confirmation is not the end of your spiritual journey. It is, rather a beginning. It is an opportunity of a life time.

I look forward to getting to know you better and working with you for the purpose of a more just and peaceful world.

Your Servant,

Pastor Ken