

# The Bethel Pulpit

Pastor John Swanson

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**BETHEL**

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org)

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

## John 8:31-36

September, 2016. That is when those who are affirming their baptism today began confirmation. They were 6th graders then – recent graduates of fine elementary schools all over the Madison area – and they were nervously, but enthusiastically entering the world of middle school.

And now it is October of 2019. Three years and a couple months have gone by. As we initially think about that time frame, we may find ourselves reflecting on how it relates to us – about where we have been in those 3+ years, about what we have been doing, how we have grown, whom we have met, who have we said good-bye to, where have we traveled, etc.

But I would like to spend some time on that 3+ year journey that those 15 confirmation students have been on. In the 25+ years that I have overseen the confirmation ministry here at Bethel, I cannot think of another class that has experienced more transition than this class.

Let me explain what I mean:

We at Bethel moved much of our confirmation focus to Sunday nights beginning in September of 2016. And it was then that we began intentionally strengthening the connections that adult faith leaders had with their classes. The way we did that was by having them stay with their class for the entire confirmation journey. For this class they have been shepherded by Phil Bramley. But those were not the only changes that they have been a part of here at Bethel.

In those 3+ years we had four senior pastors or lead pastors, three Directors of Youth Ministry, and two Christian Education/Lifelong Learning Directors. And with some of that staff change our ability to do confirmation smoothly experienced a few hiccups along the way – hiccups that this class and their parents had to deal with the most.

These past 3+ years have also seen the inside of our building undergo some significant change – the first

floor and portions of the lower level were renovated and upgraded in some wonderful ways.

And whether the confirmation class is aware of it or not, the organizational structure of Bethel has also undergone a remarkable change in the 3+ years. We now have 5 ministry teams and 3 resource teams, along with our joint council – and together they and the staff and many other volunteers are working together to create ministry goals that are now and will continue to guide and shape Bethel into the future.

Change seems to have been the one constant these past few years. And this confirmation classes has been asked to weather the storm like none other. Change or transition has rocked their boats from the moment they began confirmation three years ago and it has followed them all the way up to and including the last few weeks of this process – little has been normal or routine.

And, as I have thought about the tremendous amount of change/transition that has taken place here at Bethel since September, 2016, my first thought is to apologize to this class/you guys.

But the longer I thought about it, the less inclined I was to look at their/your unique journey as a negative or as something needing to be apologized for. Of course, there were a few aspects of confirmation for them/you that were a bit more disorganized than usual – and for that I am sorry.

But for this process, for this rough and bumpy journey, for all of this time of transition and change, I do not apologize. In fact, I would actually suggest that this transition time has served this class well.

This class has been the recipient of a congregation who has been truly working on understanding where they have been, where they are now and where they hope to go in the future. This congregation – we – have done work these past three years – necessary work. Work that may not have always been fun and work that not everyone was eager to be a part of; but work that proved vitally important. Work that dug deep and opened up closets, both literally and figuratively; bringing light into those places, exposing

clutter, baggage and messes. And creating opportunities for cleaning up and starting over. We are now here – not done with the transition or transformation or change, but in a new and good place.

This past Tuesday I was talking with Pam Shellberg, Bethel's Director of Lifelong Faith Formation, and we were talking about how church has changed – not just here at Bethel in the past 3 years, but how church – how church attendance, how church involvement, how church life has all drastically changed in the past 20 or so years. I was sharing with her that I felt that this confirmation class experienced more than their fair share of change. Pam then told me about a conversation that she had several years ago with the pastor of the congregation that she was a member of in Portland, Maine.

Pam said that the pastor was young – in her early 30's – and during one of their conversations they were talking about the church and Pam began sharing how the church has changed so much in the past 30 years and how hard that is to see. Pam said that the young pastor told her that she did not at all experience the church in that way and she did not at all feel that great sense of sadness or loss. And as she said that to Pam, Pam realized that this young pastor and all those young pastors and others who are in their early 30s or younger are not saddled with this same heavy blanket of American church history grief. Young people simply know the church as it is today.

They know nothing of Wednesday night's being set aside for church. Or youth sporting events or practices NOT taking place on Sunday mornings. They never heard of Luther League or Lutefisk Dinners. Church membership is viewed with suspicion by many from this age demographic. And the idea of most everyone in a community going to church and going every Sunday – and going to churches that are either Protestant or Roman Catholic – that is absolutely foreign to people of this age.

Pam then said to me, "You know, John. These kids getting confirmed probably took all the change taking place at Bethel absolutely in stride. Look at their faith statement projects (many of them were in my office at the time) – they clearly reflect faith that is resilient, faith that is flexible, open, understanding,

and generous. That seems pretty good to me." I agreed.

I get why we have used the terms transition and change so much over the course of the last few years, but as I have thought about this transition process and its relationship and connection to these 15 confirmation students, I have begun to understand it a bit differently.

When I hear the words change or transition, I tend to think in terms of a beginning point and an ending point. But I do not think that is what happened here at Bethel. Instead, I would describe what we have been through more along the lines of movement. 1st Century Christians were called people of the Way – that term, like movement, has no sense of an ending point. Both words, instead, make us think of an openness, a vastness, an expanse of possibilities – they call on us to truly consider what it means to be a follower of God – to be part of a movement – a holy movement.

And as we reflect back on our experiences these past three years and the experience of the 1st Century Christians, we know that the journey is not always easy. Yet, we and they are called to act and to think and to speak and to care as if this movement actually means something.

I am beginning to think that the Church of tomorrow will have a lot more in common with the church of the 1st Century than it will with the church of my youth ... and that is okay.

When I think about the promises that we ask our confirmation students to make:

- to live among God's faithful people;
- to hear his Word and share in his supper;
- to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed;
- to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus;
- and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

...when I hear those words, I think of people in action – people caring, serving, loving, helping, holding, doing. These are not stale or mundane or out of touch promises. and as I think about the church – the Church with the big "C" I think we will be needing more and more people of action as we continue on this movement. We need people who are on the way to something – something bigger than themselves – people who are eager to share

God's love, and God's grace, and God's mercy in ways that make sense to them and to those that they will be connecting with.

Transition, change, movement. However we understand the flow of life and the bumps that we face in the midst of that journey, it seems clear to me that a huge part of the gift of those bumps or whatever you want to call them is the process that we take to deal with them – the work that we do, the struggles that we overcome, the pain that we deal with, the sadness that we face, the wrongs that we might have to right, the people we meet. All of that and more shape us and bring us to a new place. Thank God for the movement of life and for the assurance that through it all, we are not alone. Amen.