Sunday, April 22, 2001
THREE GUIDES FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH
John 20:19-28

Today in our worship services, 75 young people will be received into membership in our congregation through the rite of Confirmation. Since last September, these young people have participated in weekly class sessions and group discussions led by a team of dedicated teachers coordinated by our youth director, Rita Christensen.

Kathryn Campbell, Matt Geiger, and I have also had the privilege of meeting with the whole group from time to time, and each of these young people has had a personal one-on-one discussion with one of us in our offices during the last month. Also, during these past months, each class member has been expected to attend worship services regularly, listen closely to the sermons, write summaries of selected sermons, and volunteer for a service project during this period. Rita has read every one of the sermon summaries.

The ceremony for the Rite of Confirmation is a brief one, as you will see. But do not let its brevity mislead you. Early last year, I officiated at a marriage ceremony, and after it was finished, the bride said to me, “Is it over already?” I responded, “No, it has just begun.” The test of whether or not a marriage is going to be a good one has nothing to do with the ceremony itself. It’s the next 50 to 75 years that count. I often say to the bride and groom in the pre-marital conference that there is no correlation between the length of the ceremony and the length of the marriage.

The same is true for the Confirmation service today. It is only the beginning. It’s like the kick-off at a football game. It’s very important, but it only gets the game underway. What happens throughout the rest of the game is what truly matters. You can have the best kick-off possible and still lose the game. So, in today’s sermon, I want to give you three guides for spiritual growth because it is when you continue to grow spiritually throughout the rest of your life that your faith will give you the support and guidance that you need.

The first guide for continued spiritual growth comes directly from today’s gospel story about Thomas, one of the original 12 disciples. He is forever remembered with the term “doubting Thomas.” I see this designation as a positive rather than a negative one. The spiritual principle at work here is: do not be afraid to doubt. Do not be afraid to ask questions, to seek new information. The art of gaining knowledge and understanding consists in not being afraid to ask the right questions. Every major advance in human history has come about because someone had the courage to doubt. This was not the first time that Thomas was not afraid to ask the right question. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had been trying to explain to his disciples what was going to happen and what lay beyond the cross. Among other things, he said to his disciples, “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.”

It was Thomas who spoke first. He asked without any hesitation, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” It was a comment and question the other disciples were afraid to ask out loud. The answer Thomas received was, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

He was the kind of person who could not live with an unasked question. That's a positive quality in spiritual growth. The art of gaining knowledge and understanding in every aspect of life consists in asking the right questions. All of life is to be a learning experience, not only when you are in school, but no matter what you are doing or where you are. Spiritual growth, like learning, is a life-long process, and asking questions, having honest doubts, is integral to all growth.

You've heard the saying, "Ignorance is bliss," but deep down we know this is not true. Someone once said, "If ignorance is bliss, why are so many people unhappy?"

The second guide for continued spiritual growth is: do not be afraid to believe. That sounds as if it is the opposite of the first guide, but it's not. Thomas was a believer as well as a doubter. Honest doubt is part of the foundation of strong belief. He became a believer because of his doubts.

Last Sunday's Easter sermon had the title, "Too Good to Believe." Belief is not the opposite of doubt but frequently grows out of honest doubt. As I mentioned last Sunday, belief frequently comes before understanding. You can believe in something even though you do not completely understand it. As I said last week, I believe in love although I do not completely understand it. You can believe in God without completely understanding the Holy and the Sacred. That does not mean you should not try to learn more about God, but you will not learn more unless you begin with belief after you have explored your doubts.

It's part of our heritage, which comes out of the Hebrew tradition, that God continues to be revealed in new ways. In other words, there's always more we can learn about God. Pastor John Robinson said to our Pilgrim forefathers and mothers before they boarded the ship named the Mayflower to come to this country, "There is always more light and truth to break forth from God's word."

It's also part of our spiritual heritage that life is not an endless cycle of going around in circles. Time is not like a wheel spinning ceaselessly, never altering its course. Progress is possible. Tomorrow can be better than today. We can improve conditions in this creation. Because we are created in God's image, we are co-creators with God.

The second guide to spiritual growth, do not be afraid to believe, has as its corollary: do not be afraid to make a commitment. It has been said of people in today's culture, especially those in the younger generations, that they are afraid of commitment. More and more people agree to live together but do not want to make the long-term commitment of marriage.

Today in the Confirmation promises, you are making a solemn and sacred commitment. That's a very important first step. The second and more difficult part is honoring and being true to that commitment. You might be surprised to know that there are many parents who bring their children here for baptism and solemnly promise to do their best to bring the child up in the Christian faith, yet we never see some of the parents again. You might also be surprised to know that we have some church members who, for some reason or other, do not make a financial commitment for the support of the church. Why, I don't know. There are also those who make a financial commitment but then do not honor it. Nothing is more important for a healthy society than the making and honoring of commitments.

What you will also discover is that there is an incredible benefit that comes to you personally from discipline and fulfilled commitments. There is deep personal satisfaction and there's the

joy in having God say to you one day, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” or as the Apostle Paul could say near the end of his life, “I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.”

Do not be afraid to doubt. Do not be afraid to believe. These are the first two guides for spiritual growth.

The third guide to spiritual growth is this: do not be afraid to act. You have to act on what you believe, carry out what you believe, do what you believe, live your faith in your everyday life, otherwise your belief will atrophy. There’s a wise old saying that goes: it is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting. It’s what I call the “power of positive acting.”

That’s what the disciples did following Easter. They began to act on their faith, to tell the story, to live their faith in their everyday life. The Bible says: “faith without works is dead.” When you act out your faith, it grows stronger. When you do not act out and live your faith, it dies.

As you begin to act your faith, here’s the best overall guideline to follow as your basic principle, and it comes straight from the life and teachings of Jesus. Remember always that you and every other human being are created in the image of God. Therefore, treat yourself and every other individual accordingly. One of my favorite sayings is: the way you treat people is the way you treat God.

The implications of this principle are astounding. Because you are created in the image of God, your body, as the Apostle Paul said, is a “temple of God.” It is holy because God made you in God’s image and because God’s Spirit dwells in you. Therefore, do nothing to desecrate your body as God’s holy temple. When you abuse your body in any way — with drugs, tobacco, alcohol, or other such substances — you are treating your body as less than holy.

In the same way, when you abuse another person in any way or use another person for your own selfish desires, you are treating that person as less than holy and forgetting that he or she is also created in God’s image.

In the scripture story read earlier about Jesus appearing to his disciples on Easter Sunday evening, among other things, he said to them, “Peace be with you,” and then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” In this way, he was once more reminding them that they were created in the image of God and that God’s Spirit lived in them. Then he told them they were to act out their faith based on this fact.

Do not be afraid to doubt. Do not be afraid to believe. Do not be afraid to act on your beliefs. These are three basic guides for your continued spiritual growth. Amen.