

## Before You Go...

*A Reflection for the Sunday We Recognize Graduating High School Seniors*

From the Bible: Matthew 5 (selected verses)

Paul Alcorn  
Bedford Presbyterian Church  
Bedford, NY  
June 10, 2018

Four years ago, when you were in Confirmation, there were probably one or two times when I said to you: *"I want to make sure that, at least once, you have heard a pastor say this..."* Whether that was about ways to read and understand the Bible or about sexual orientation and being inclusive or about my understanding of and relationship to those whose faith tradition is different than ours. Today, I want to that again. Before you go off to college and step towards that new tomorrow, given the public perception of Christianity, in particular, and faith/religion, in general, I would like to remind you of this. To make sure, at least one more time, you have heard a pastor who takes God and Jesus and faith seriously say this. Four things.

First, God is...

Maybe it is easier to begin with what I think God is not.

A number of years ago I attended a national gathering of church leaders. One of the buttons being handed out read: *God Is Not a Boy's Name*. The message of the button was primarily about the patriarchy which is still prevalent in both church and culture, but it also serves as a reminder that, even though *he* is the pronoun used far too often, God is not male. Or female. Or up in the sky. And, God is not Christian. Or Jewish. Or Muslim. Or...you fill in the blank.

So, if that is not God, what or who is God for me?

I can respond to that question in several ways, but for this morning let me remind you of what I probably said to you four years ago in Confirmation. What if we thought of God as more of a verb than a noun. More as an action than a person.

What if God is the source, the inspiration, to be found in acts of:

Compassion.

Kindness.

Justice.

Forgiveness.

Peacemaking.

Gratitude.

In those moments when you do those things or experience those things or see those things, there is God.

Here are places I see and experience God.

I experience something of God when the Cherub Choir sings.

I see God when meals and conversation are taken to someone who is sick.

I stand in God's presence when we stand in front of a house we have helped to build in Nicaragua and the family talks about their 16'x16' home as their mansion and the gratitude they feel. I am surrounded by God when I leave my phone at home and walk in the woods or look up at the night sky. God is present when I and we work with others to make our congregation and our community and our country and our world a bit better today than it was yesterday.

In all those times and places God is.

Where is God for you?

I hope you take the time to notice.

Second, how large a circle and which way will you face?

Religion or faith or God...whatever word you would like to use...is about the circle around your life and about which direction you will face. Some people use their faith to make the circle around their life as small and as tight as possible in order to define who is in and who is out and who is right and who is wrong.

Do it my way or our way and you are in. Don't and you are out.

Believe this way and you are in. If you don't you are out.

Look like me. Talk like me. Dress like me and you are in. If you are different you are out.

I think, more often than not, that way of thinking about God or faith or religion is harmful and does violence to others. And, those who define God that way look like a football huddle.

Facing inward.

Only looking at each other.

Backs turned to the world.

My understanding of the witness of the Bible and the teachings of Jesus...

Is that we are to make the circle around our lives not smaller, but larger.

Not only inviting people in, but moving it outward until it encircles more and more.

The witness of the Bible is that all are made in the image of God.

All of us are named as children of God.

And we are called to be neighbors to each other.

And rather than facing inward and walking backward, we are to face outward;

To see and to recognize those in front of us for who they are.

And to walk forward until they are encircled.

Third, know the story.

I have never read the Bible cover to cover.

I have tried, but I have gotten bogged down in genealogies and lists and laws.

And, I am not asking you to.

But, I am encouraging you to know enough of the story that when those moments of decision or judgement or choice come up in your life you have a touchstone and a point of reference which will help you decide what to do or how to act or which can be a source of understanding and strength.

That story... Our story...

Includes what I read this morning.

*Blessed are the merciful.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers.*

*You are the light of the world.*

*Treat others as you would like to be treated.*

And, what about the stories in the Bible about confronting giants, because there continue to be giants in our world. Or, what about the stories of not wanting to do what you know you are supposed to do or called to do? For those moments will arise in your life. And, what about the stories of sowing seeds of making a difference or being blind and then being able to see.

Know **those** stories.

And, notice I said *story* and not Bible.

That is intentional.

Again, going back to Confirmation...

I urge you to read the Bible as story and poetry and not as science or a newspaper.

The Bible is inspired and contains truth, but it is not meant to be read literally.

Fourth, community.

Look around you.

You probably know some of the people here.

You probably recognize a few others.

But there are many here you probably don't know.

That is okay.

But, here is the thing.

All these people are the ones who, in ways large and small, have cared for you and prayed for you and supported you. These are the people your parents chose to stack around your life to help you grow up to who you are today.

As a community, we are far from perfect, but we try.

We try to care for one another.

We try to support one another.

We try to challenge one another.

We add our faith and our hope and our money and our energy to the community called Bedford Presbyterian Church in order to do what we can to make the world closer to what we think God intends.

The question I have for you is this.

As you step towards what comes next in your life, what is that community going to be for you?

The community which will support you and encourage you and challenge you to do and be your best?

Where are you going to find it?

What is it going to look like?

What values do you want it to hold out in front of you?

What I think I know is it will look different than this.

Different from what I have known and from what you have known growing up here.

What I hope is you is this:

That you have the vision and the courage to find it and shape it and to be a part of it.  
That it does for you tomorrow what this community has done for you as you grew up.

And finally...

The comedian, Jimmy Fallon, was the surprise guest speak at the graduation ceremony at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL. Do you recognize the name of the school? It is where, on Valentine's Day, a fellow student killed 14 classmates and 3 staff members. Taking that that tragedy and pain, a number of those students launched the #NeverAgain movement and, this summer, will be traveling the country registering young adults and encouraging them to vote. I read Jimmy Fallon's speech and would share this part of it with you because it applies to each of you, as well.

*Most commencement speakers, they'll get up here and talk in the future tense. 'You will succeed. You will make us proud. And you will change the world. Most commencement speakers say, 'You are the future.' But I'm not gonna say that, because you're not the future. You're the present. You are succeeding. You are making us proud. You are changing the world, so keep changing the world and keep making us proud.*