

Symbols of Our Faith
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I love Confirmation. I love teaching Confirmation and walking with young people through the process. And I know that since Dana and I taught Emily, Chloe, David, and Holly this year, a little bit of our theologies may have rubbed off on them. That became pretty clear when I asked them on the retreat what scripture they'd like to use for the service today, and the response was the one about the son who messes up and he comes home and his father forgives him. This, of course, is the story of the Prodigal Son, and it's one of my favorite stories in the whole Bible. If this is the only Bible story you remember from our year together, I'm okay with that.

The great theologian Henri Nouwen wrote a book called *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* where he mused on this parable from the perspective of the younger son, the older son, and the father, and he spent a great deal of time interpreting Rembrandt's famous painting of this story. This would take several sermons to give this story and Henri Nouwen's exploration of it, its fair due, but I want to focus today for a little bit on the younger son.

In class I explained that Jesus sets this story up by saying that there's a father with two sons, one you can think of as the older, more responsible son and the younger son is a little reckless. The younger son asks his dad for his inheritance and he then goes to a distant place, say the Biblical equivalent of Vegas, and he blows the money on some pretty shady activities. The Bible calls it "dissolute living" so maybe we church people won't blush too much and get embarrassed by what he does in this distant sin city. Eventually the young man is broke and starving, an outsider in a foreign land, and he decides to come home, to see if his father will give him a job and a place to stay. He's not even expecting forgiveness, but he does need help.

The father's response, Jesus tells us, is incredible. His dad sees him while he's far off walking up the road in all his misery and shame, and his father is filled with compassion and love for this wayward son of his. He runs out to greet him, he hugs him, and kisses him, his dad welcomes him home with open arms.[1]

Hopefully none of us will mess up quite this badly, but if we do, God will be there to embrace us when we fail. This is the ultimate vision of acceptance and love, and my prayer is that this is the vision of God that stays with all of us in our lives. As Henri Nouwen so rightly states, "The young man being embraced by the Father is no longer just one repentant sinner, but the whole of humanity returning to God." [2]

Dana and I also told you four that we don't think of Confirmation as graduation. Let me say that again, Confirmation is not graduation! We better still see you in church sometimes, even though church is early on Sunday morning and you'd maybe rather sleep in. There are days when I would too, believe me, I'm not a morning person. But church is one of the few places in my life where I have always felt this compassion of God like we see in the story of the Prodigal Son extended to me by God and by my congregation even when I sometimes didn't consider it or appreciate it or even think that I deserved it. That love and forgiveness was there anyway.

We also know, all of us in this sanctuary today, that you're going to change, your priorities will change, your beliefs will change too. On the retreat a few of these Confirmands asked me to show them the stole I made back in the day when I got confirmed. Well, here's my stole, a little discolored from my many moves and being next to Lord know what in various boxes along my

journey, but I still have it. Some of the symbols I would choose all over again, while others; I wouldn't.

I said on Easter Sunday, and it was as true for my fifteen year old self as it is for me today, that Jesus is the center of my faith. So I made a simple cross of wood at the top of my stole to depict this reality. I always liked the passage about Jesus being the light of the world, so I made sure to include a red candle on my stole, red being the color of Confirmation and the candle symbolizing the light of Christ that can penetrate the darkest places in our world and in our lives.

I chose to symbolize God by depicting the all-seeing eye of God. Back then I found it comforting, this feeling that God was everywhere, God was always watching out for me, and I thought it was pretty cool that this symbol of the all-seeing eye of God is on the back of the one dollar bill. Don't pull out a dollar now, I know you want to, but it's the symbol on the back at the top of the pyramid, check it out later.

To be honest, I now find this symbol a little creepy and too Big Brother. My image of God has gotten less concrete over the years, more metaphorical, far less physical. I guess I've become more comfortable with the mystery of it all and I wouldn't choose to depict God as this all-seeing eye anymore. It also reminds me too much of Sauron from Lord of the Rings, but that's a whole different sermon right there.

To depict the Holy Spirit, I chose the symbol of the dove coming down in heavenly rays of light. This reminded me of Jesus' baptism when God declares him beloved, and I would pick this symbol again if I had to make my stole today. I think of the Holy Spirit as God's presence in the world, but I do appreciate the symbolic dove as a sign of the Spirit and of peace in general. Of all the symbols I made, this one makes me the happiest.

My last symbol is some sort of branch. I have wracked my brain to come up with what this is, is it an olive branch to again go with the peace theme? Was it supposed to be a laurel tree branch? Lauren means "laurel-crowned" and one of my youth leaders gave me a card that I still keep in my wallet that explains my name and has one of the Psalms on the back, so it could be that. I honestly don't remember what this symbol is supposed to be. I even called my parents and asked them and they didn't remember either.

At any rate, it's something from the natural world and I still appreciate feeling the presence of God in nature, so I guess we'll keep it too. Though next time I would try to be more specific with what kind of earthly symbol I picked.

So I walked you through my stole, and most of these symbols, I would keep if I made a new stole today. But the image of God in particular, I would change. And that's a pretty major symbol to change, that's a pretty big part of my theology that has changed over the years! I've had new experiences in the past decade plus that have caused me to question things that I took for granted when I was in high school. You will too.

Today I might try to depict this scripture about the Prodigal Son to show how I view God. I'd draw one person coming home and another running out to greet him along a winding path. Because this image of God is what grounds my faith now, what gives me hope when times are tough and I feel like I'm traveling through some dark places on this journey of life.

Of all the lessons you, Chloe, Holly, David, and Emily, have learned in Confirmation, I hope that this image of God embracing humanity sometimes in spite of ourselves stays with you. And I hope that you remember that the church isn't going anywhere. Pilgrim Church will always stand as a safe place for you to land, as a place that opens its doors to those who stay put and work

hard and to those who wander and make some bad choices from time to time. We will be here to run out and greet you on the road, welcoming you home. May it be so with all of us. Amen.

[1] Luke 15:20

[2] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, 58.