

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
May 4 & 5, 2013
John Crosby
Commitment Class Weekend
3 John 1-4**

This is one of those marking moments. For Jewish kids, it's the Bar Mitzvah or the Bat Mitzvah. If you're Catholic, it's First Holy Communion and then the extra name that you get in Confirmation. Here we call it Commitment Class. It's a stake in the ground, saying that from this day on, this is *our* faith, your faith, not your parent's faith. One of the things that make this special is hearing from these no longer babies about their growing faith, but something is different this year. For the first time in the 24 years I've been here, the Student Ministries leader is not giving the sermon. I am. And it's not because Carrie [Carrie Gleeson, Director of Commitment Class] is not a great preacher. She and I are going to talk together this next month. It's because I thought, why should I miss all the fun?

I had a baby who was baptized here and went through Commitment Class here and now three weeks from today is getting married here. It seemed a good time because the kids need to hear from us, who seem at least to think we know it all, that we are still learning and growing. The kids need to hear that we have made all kinds of mistakes with them and we apologize, but we want to keep growing together and I want to tell them some of the things I am still learning.

One of the things came several years ago when a friend of mine died unexpectedly. Since he was a strong Christian guy, his friends and family went through his Bible to see if there were any verses that were especially meaningful to him. They came to one that was starred and had the date that the guy died in the margin. The verse was one of the last things he saw. His name was Bill Widmoyer, and they asked me if I would read the passage from the Bible at his funeral. I faked it and pretended like I knew what the Bible verse was but I didn't. I'd never read it before. It's right near the end of the Bible and it's by one of the oldest characters that knew Jesus, the apostle John, an old, old man by then. It starts out, "From the elder,

To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.

² Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. ³ It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it.

This is the line Bill had underlined in his Bible [3 John 1:4].

⁴ I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

I had never caught that before. It struck me, not just in the head but in here. "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." Not that they believe, not that they obey, but that they are walking, that they are following Jesus. You don't have to have all the answers to follow. You don't have to do everything right to follow. You just need to get up and

walk. I'd like to just give you a couple of ideas about what it's like to walk in the truth, and I want to give you parents and others, who love these kids, a couple of prayers for them. It comes best, frankly, from somebody who has been around the block a little bit longer. Like it or not, that's me. I'm not middle aged. People don't live to be 120 years old, so for me, looking at them is a reminder. That's what it's like for the apostle Paul. Paul had a protégé, a junior higher in Commitment Class, whom he was going to send out into the world, and he wrote this to him. He said, "Timothy,

² The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. [2 Timothy 2:2]

"What you've learned from me with a lot of people around, entrust now to others." He's talking about the power of community. We are here together and not alone because we have received something from others. We are sharing it with others and want that to continue into the future.

Many of these guys, when they go to church, go to The Table on Sunday evenings. Last Sunday night at The Table, we celebrated the seniors who are graduating from high school. A couple of them got up here, Andrew Allen and Sarah Nielsen, and talked about things that they had learned in their time here. They are small group leaders in the Commitment Class, and they said they had learned about leadership. They said, "I go to the kids' games," they called you "the kids" because they're so old, "I go to the kids' games and their concerts because that's what my leader did. And you know what? I take the kids in my group out to breakfast because that's what my leader did. And this year I had a verse of the Bible that I wanted to have my kids memorize with me because that's what my leader did. And before the retreat, I prayed for each of the kids in my small group by name because that's what my leader did." They were learning from the ones who had given them the faith in the presence of many witnesses. It's powerful! When you see that you cannot do it alone but can do it with other people, it's powerful. That it happens for adults, too.

I had a friend named Mike, and Mike was a smart aleck. I would describe him differently if we were not in church. He was a smart aleck, and he was in a small group with me for a bunch of years. He was always the one who wanted to ask the smart aleck questions. Didn't really believe but was there. Then he got very sick and started to come to the Bible study to read the Bible and to pray with his friends and be helped by them. They loved him and encouraged him, and when he got very, very sick, they stuck with him. They said, "Why don't you become a deacon in the church? You could help other people. It would take your mind off what's going bad with you." So Mike became a deacon after he got this brain tumor.

The deacons and the elders in our church serve Communion. They hold the bread and the cup, and people come forward. One of the best memories I will ever have in my life is the last time Mike served Communion. Mike couldn't really talk by then because of the brain tumor, and he didn't walk so much as he lurched, like this. He wanted so much to serve Communion again but his wife said, "Oh, honey, I don't think so." Our friend Bill called him up and said, "We can do this, Mike. We can do this!" And right over here, Bill, who was like 6 foot 4, walks down to the front with Mike, like this. I hand them the bread and the juice. Bill has his arm around Mike like this so he's got a hand on the bread and the juice, and they turn around and people come forward. Bill would go, "The Body of Christ broken for you," and Mike would go, "Uh-huh." And the people would dip and go back. When everyone was served, Bill walked Mike out. That is what Communion is supposed to be. It was because they did the hard work of being jerks

together in a small group, making fun of each other, laughing with each other, learning together, that they were friends together and by the end, God was right in the middle of it. That's my prayer for you guys, that you who have learned from people who gave things to you in front of many witnesses will now do the same thing with others.

It really counts who you listen to though, doesn't it? Here is a picture I want to show you. I bet the Commitment Class kids know what this is. *(Slide shown.)* Do you recognize that? That's the Statement of Faith. When we go on a retreat at the end of the year, the kids all write down their Statement of Faith. Some of them spend hours doing it. Sometimes it is filled with questions or *I don't know*s or *I'm learning*s. That's great. The reason this came to my mind is because I saw it last Sunday. After all the seniors worshiped, they went downstairs for cake and to be congratulated about what is next for them in college. On the table next to the cake were copies of the Statements of Faith they had written when they were eighth graders. They were each given theirs back so they could see how they had grown and what they had learned and what they had done with it.

I say often that the most important people in our church are the people who deal with our children and our students. I talk to every student minister before he or she is hired because they are handling the most important thing in our lives, aren't they? They are great heroes. Cory [Cory Gregory] and Carrie and Lee [Lee Hanssen] and the whole team of student ministers are great, but they are not the stars of the show in the Commitment Class. The ones who are the real heroes in the Commitment Class are seated right here. They are the seniors in high school, who have been the small group leaders and have presented the truth in front of many witnesses and now want to see it passed on. Will the senior student leaders stand up, the kids who are the seniors of the Commitment Class. *(Clapping.)*

First prayer for you parents. If I were going to do it over again, I'd pray lots for my kids. But if I were going to do it over again, I would pray more for my kids' friends, their lives, the friends they choose, because the people we are around rubs off. Pray for the friendships that your kids will develop in high school. The second thing that hit me that Paul said to young Timothy was this. He said, "Don't let anybody look down on you because you are young but set an example for them in your life." We don't call this Commitment Class because of what people learn about God. That's the Confirmation Class, and you learn all the right beliefs about God. We call this Commitment Class to ask them, what they are committed to *doing* about it.

This is a sponge. It really is good for nothing. It's stiff as a board. It can't do anything by itself. But when you take this sponge and put it into water, it soaks up. It soaks up life and grows and becomes flexible. That's what many of these kids have done this year. They have become flexible. But you know one of the truths about a sponge? If you take out the sponge full of water and you leave it there for three or four days, what happens? It stinks. It stinks! And anything it touches stinks, and then it gets stiff again, doesn't it? But it stinks! Many of you guys have absorbed a lot of living water this year. If it stays inside you, you will stink. You will know all the right things and you won't do anything about it. Sponges are meant to absorb and to be squeezed out. Set an example. Don't just talk about this stuff. Don't just make it junior high religion. Set an example for other people. Maybe encourage your parents to set an example.

These kids are doing that. They have learned from the best, and they are doing that. There are over 150 applications from eighth graders through high school to do work for the King, work for God in this church and in this community in the year to come. They want to set an example.

Some of them up here will be on our Student Lay Care team. One of the things that makes this church different is, it's not just the pastors who do all the care ministry. It's lay people who have been trained to visit the hospitals and lead the small groups and be with the dying and care for people when their marriages are breaking up. Two years ago we started a student version of that. We call it Slay Care, not Lay Care but Slay Care, Student Lay Care. This is this year's group. They are going to care for kids when they fail in school or when they get in trouble or when they get sick or when their parents' marriages break up. They are going to set an example for others by caring for them.

Some of them will go to the other ends of the earth. This was a group of kids who went to Africa a couple of years ago. High school kids, three years older than you guys, who went to Africa. One of the days they were there in Zambia, they saw poor kids who had nothing when you guys have everything and they helped feed them. They fed them a meal that they would not have had otherwise, and that was a profound thing for them. When they came home, they decided not to forget what they had seen, and they raised over \$30,000. High school kids raised over \$30,000 and sent it back to Zambia, not so there would be more meals but so there would be a program that would last, and these kids would be fed. We say over and over, they are not the church of the future, they are the church right now, right here.

Let me give my second prayer for the parents. I have a friend who has taught me a lot about parenting. She said, "Trust me, John. Nothing good happens after midnight. Make sure they're home." She said, "I prayed that my kids would get caught every time." She knew what they were like. "If they get caught in the small stuff, it will save them." And for that, I guess I've learned to pray differently for my kids. I really hope that your parents and your friends will not pray that you will be safe in high school. I don't want you to be safe in high school. I want you to get in trouble in high school. But I don't want you to get into the "Everybody else is doing it. I'm going to do it." kind of trouble. I want you to get in the kind of trouble people who hear a different drum will get into, the ones who will forgive and reach out, the ones who will serve and make a difference. I want you to get in the kind of trouble for the King that only the King of Heaven can get you out of. Don't wait until you are an adult. Adults are boring. Start now. I am praying that you will get in good trouble, trouble that only the King can get you out of.

I think this day is profound because Maggie is going to get married but also because this is a great reminder to us about what the most important thing in life is. You are here today and we have made a big deal out of this because this is the most important thing in life. I've told this story to the parents, you're not in here often so let me tell it to you. There is a guy named Jim Dobson, who is a parent. He's got kids, and his oldest son is a basketball freak. This guy, Jim Dobson, has a friend who is a professional basketball player. Pete Maravich is his name, and Pete would come over to the house all the time. He would play basketball with Dobson's kids, especially with his boy, and the kid thought Maravich walked on water. He loved his dad but Maravich was the best.

Well anyway, one day Peter Maravich was at the gym with Jim Dobson, the dad, and as Maravich walks out on the court, he waves at Dobson, shoots up a basket, and falls over dead. He's in his forties, and he dies right there in the gym. Dobson is a doctor and runs over and tries to revive him, but Maravich dies. Dobson is just crying like a baby, not only because he has lost his friend but because he knows he has to tell his kids. He takes the rest of the day off from work and when his son Ryan comes home from school, he takes him into the kitchen and says, "Ryan, I've got to tell you something. There is no easy way to say this. Pete got sick, and he

died today.” Ryan just bursts into tears, just like you would if somebody that you love died, and Dobson reaches across the table and says, “I’m with you.”

They are crying together, and Dobson says, “Now, son, you’ve got to listen to this. Some day, and I hope it’s a long time from now, some day somebody is going to come to you, and they are going to say, “Your dad has died.” That’s okay. Dads are older. They are going to die. Some day you are going to hear that, and I hope you will cry but I want you to remember this. He said, “The most important thing in my life is that you know that as soon as I died, I walked straight through the gates of heaven. I want you to know that, and I want you to know that I will be standing just inside the gates of heaven, looking out, waiting for you to walk in. That’s the most important thing in my life I want you to know.” That’s the most important thing in a grandparent’s or a friend’s or a parent’s life that you know when you walk through the gates of heaven.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You are still here with us, that You love us, that You have in the blink of an eye chosen these babies who have grown into young adults, and that you have asked them to commit themselves to you and to walk in faith. I pray that their journey will inspire us, frighten the daylights out of them, and show them that You are the God who can be trusted. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.