

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for Confirmation and Commissioning, June 1, 2008  
Including the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion  
Lessons: I Samuel 3:1-10, Matthew 9:9-13 and Luke 10:38-42

## HERE I AM

Gwen, Emily, Ricky, and Katie, who are you? That's how our confirmation course began back in September, when I asked you to tell my imaginary scientist from another planet who you are. Not *what* you are but *who*. We soon discovered you cannot say who you are without reference to others. Human life is a matter of relatedness. We know ourselves in relation to other people and in relation to God. Completely by myself, without even memory of love, friendship, or shared life and responsibility, I would be no one – a biological organism with a relatively large brain, but not a person. *Who I am to myself* depends very much upon *who I am to God* and *who I am to other people*, those who know me well but, also, those who do not know me personally at all. Because of God, I am related to those who do not even know my name. Because of Jesus Christ, I have responsibility to care about them and their well-being, even if I don't happen to like them. If I care only for "me and mine," that self-centeredness becomes a judgment upon me because God loves the world.

This morning, I'm asking you a second question about yourselves. *Where* are you? Yes, I know, you're sitting in church glad to be done with the nervous part of coming up front and answering questions, but that's not what I mean, of course. Samuel was only a boy when he heard God calling him in the night. So, where Samuel was in life was pretty close to its beginning. His mother had dedicated him to God, but so far he had very little idea what that dedication meant beyond helping Eli, the aging priest. Matthew was an outcast when Jesus called him – a traitor to his people, a collaborator with the enemy whose armies occupied his homeland. Where Matthew lived was alone in the darkness of his neighbors' contempt for him. Mary was a woman in a very male-superior society which pronounced a curse on the man who would dare to teach the things of God to a mere woman. Her sister Martha agreed with their society that Mary's place was in the kitchen, serving men.

But don't blame Martha, because she is one of us. We tend to let others tell us who we are and where we are in life. You're good at this or that – soccer, math, ballet, creative writing, being a friend, and so on. But you're not good at this or that other thing. From early childhood, I was told I could not (and therefore should not) sing. One day, however, the church's choir director told my mother I could be taught to carry a tune – not to become a good singer, but to carry a tune. I knew she was right, but nothing happened, and so I still

cannot carry a tune for very long. I was also told, falsely, that I didn't really have a mind for the math or for the technical but should favor English – the writing and literature. So some truth about me got mixed with some false assumptions, and I happily accepted English as my major study in college. No great harm was done that I can see, but I saw myself in life where others said I was, and I let myself be defined by others' evaluations of me.

Now, understand, it is foolish to overlook completely what other people see in us. Suppose I had decided, "I'll show them; I'll become a professional singer." Well, guess what: I would have wasted, not only time, but my hopes and dreams, and I would have sacrificed my grip on reality.

Jesus meets us where we are and calls us by name to follow him and become the persons we can be, living by God's grace. He changes the way we see ourselves. Matthew did not remain an outcast and shameful traitor. Mary did not have to live as a "mere" woman, bound to housework and barred from learning. Neither did Martha, and if she chose the traditional role, she still did not have to be "just" a woman. Maybe Martha liked cooking for people, but she could learn to see herself differently, with more self-respect.

You are not Samuel and probably will not hear God's voice calling you aloud in the night, but that does not mean you cannot hear God calling you. Neither is God's call only for prophets and ministers. Today, you have been commissioned as a lifelong disciple of Jesus Christ. You have dedicated yourself to learning life from him, seeing yourself and others in your own unique way but within the grace and freedom of his way. From now on, your life cannot be all about you. And yet, he promises us that by losing ourselves – making it not all about "me" – we will truly find ourselves.

Who am I? Am I the kid with 300 friends on Facebook, most of whom don't even know me? Today, we have affirmed with you that you are a unique person loved by God, who values *who you are* and wants to give meaning and purpose to the days and years of your life. You are called, no less than Samuel or Matthew or Mary, to think and live and relate to other people differently because God loves you and Jesus calls you to be his disciple.

Gwen, Rick, Emily, Katie, we are very proud of you. I am proud of you. Not only have you made it through twenty-five lessons with me on some pretty deep subjects and then done well in your examination by our Session, but I believe that you, each in your own way, have begun to wrestle with what it means to be loved by God and called by Jesus Christ to live with purpose that comes from God's love for you and for this whole world of people. Believe me, that wrestling has only just begun.

Have fun. I think kids your age need more fun, with less pressure to measure up to standards and keep proving yourselves as though life were a test. Life is not a test. It is a gift and a calling. A gift to be shared, a calling to be answered and followed in trust. From this day on, you represent in your own flesh and blood the truth that God loves you and the truth that God loves your neighbors – all those other people – as well. In that sense, you are a minister of Jesus Christ. How your being a minister for him will work out remains to be seen, and more of it will always remain to be seen, as long as you live.

Now it's nearly time to share Communion in what I hope is a new way for you, because you are no longer a child in faith. Welcome, Gwen, Rick, Emily, and Katie, into this community of lifelong students called by Jesus Christ to follow him into life that is real and true. Amen.