

“You’ve Got a Ticket to Ride”
A Sermon for Confirmation
Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV) – wait to read withing sermon text
By Rev. John Gill.

If I were to ask you what the most important book of the Bible is, what would you say? Probably Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John – and, of course, you would be right, because without the Gospels, we wouldn’t know the story of Christ. But this morning, I’d like to suggest that there is another book equal in importance: Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul is writing to a church he has not yet visited and wants to explain to them the meaning of – WHY Jesus came, and – WHAT DIFFERENCE Christ makes in our lives. He wanted to give them the basics of the faith.

In fact, when new Christians ask me where to begin reading the Bible, I tell them to first read John – and then Romans. Therefore, as our four confirmands begin their Christian walk in earnest this morning, I think it is fitting that we turn to the Book of Romans (Romans 12:1-2 NRSV):

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

“I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters...” Therefore ... THERE – FORE. Such an easily overlooked word. It’s natural for our eye to skim right over it and not see it at all ... “I appeal to you (therefore)...” But this morning, I want to suggest that we take notice of this poor neglected word – because in reality, it MAY be the most important word in the entire Letter to the Romans!

If you remember your English class in school, you’ll recall that the word “therefore” is a conjunction. A conjunction is a word that connects that which has come before with that which is to follow. It joins together the two parts of a sentence, and it implies a cause-and-effect relationship between the two. “I lost my keys, THEREFORE I can’t get into my car.” Cause and effect. Did you notice how “therefore” is the word on which the whole sentence pivots? ... “I lost my keys – therefore – I can’t get into my car.” The whole movement of the sentence turns like a hinge on the word “therefore.”

By this time, you are probably thinking, “Now preacher, that’s all fine and good – but why are you giving us a grammar lesson this morning?” Because, the word “therefore” in our text serves the same function for the Book of Romans as it does in a sentence – It is the pivot on which the entire letter turns.

You see, up to this point in the Letter, Paul has been spinning out theology... how God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. But now, with one little word, everything pivots. Paul shifts gears and begins to explain the implications of what he has said up to this point: he begins to APPLY the faith to the Christian life.

It's as if he is taking every major theme he has been developing in the first eleven chapters, and has added this "therefore" to them: Jesus is Lord – THEREFORE..." God's new age as dawned – THEREFORE..." All are justified in Christ – THEREFORE..." Salvation comes by grace through faith – THEREFORE..."

THEREFORE, what? THEREFORE – present your bodies as a living sacrifice... THEREFORE – do not be conformed to this world... THEREFORE – be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Yes, "therefore" is a pretty powerful little word! It's where the "rubber" of theology hits the "road" of the Christian life.

My friends, this morning is a "therefore moment" for Daniel, Juliette, Noah, and Connie. And I'd like to address the rest of my message directly to them (but the rest of you are invited to eaves drop!).

As you prepare to come to have your faith confirmed, I want to share how today is a "therefore moment" in each of your lives.

Just like the conjunction in a sentence, the act of Confirmation links what has gone before with what is to follow. It brings those two parts of your lives together in a cause-and-effect relationship: It is a moment of transition and transformation.

From our conversations in at youth group, it appears that each of you already has some level of faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior. But today, you will publicly profess your faith for the first time – and make him the Lord of your life. And with that declaration, you will become citizens of the Kingdom of God and full professing members of this congregation.

But it is important to remember that Confirmation isn't so much an "ending" or "beginning," as it is a moment of transition. Your Christian walk doesn't begin when you leave the church this morning, nor is today the end of your religious schooling, as if you were getting some kind of spiritual "diploma" this morning. No, your Confirmation is a natural continuation of a faith journey that began in your life long before you were able to understand its meaning, and will continue for the rest of your life, and beyond. Yes, today is a "therefore moment," a vital link in the chain of your life... a cause-and-effect event, connecting your past and your future.

Let me explain: All of you have already been baptized as an infant or small child. You may be wondering why we don't just baptize you all over again today. Well, many people make the argument that infants and small children ought not receive baptism at all – that baptism should only be administered to those who can profess faith – people of a certain age or maturity or understanding (what is sometimes referred to as "believers baptism").

Now, this morning, we don't have time to get into a debate about infant vs. believer's baptism: only to say that the vast majority of Christians throughout the centuries have believed (as we United Methodists believe) that baptism is NOT something WE do – some "work" or accomplishment that WE achieve or deserve. Baptism is not a "merit badge" for our faith. No, we believe that baptism is essentially something that GOD does in claiming us as His own – something we don't deserve, and cannot earn.

Baptism is a gift of God's grace, freely given and freely received, regardless of the age or mental capacity of the one receiving the gift. The gift of baptism can't be "earned" any more than salvation can be earned. That means that adults are no more (or less) worthy of baptism than are infants!

I like to describe baptism as God's "YES" to us, the act through which God claims us as His own. However, there does come a time in everyone's life when WE have to claim God as OUR own – a moment when we have to say "YES" to God. Today is that day for each of you!

Up until this point in your lives, your parents or other adults in your life, have made most of your decisions for you: They decided: where you would live; what name you should have; what school you would attend; where you would go on vacation – even what you would eat and the type of clothes you would wear.

But they also made all your religious decisions: whether or not you would go to church, and if so, which church; prayers before bed and meals (or not); family devotions or Bible readings (or not); whether you would attend worship, Sunday school or youth group. To a large extent you are here for your Confirmation this morning because of the decisions your parents or other adults made for you.

Your parents did their job – they got you here! That's the role of Christian parents

As I said, up to this point your parents made most of your decisions for you. But they can NOT make the decision to accept Christ for you. YOU have to do that for yourself. You can't get to heaven on someone else's faith. A wise person once put it like this: "God has no grandchildren," - only children. YOU must decide FOR YOURSELF to follow Jesus.

Let me try to clarify the relationship between what your PARENTS have done for you up to this point in your life, and your Confirmation this morning:

Have you ever been to a County Fair with your parents? When you arrived, your parents bought you tickets for the rides. Now, those tickets cost your parents something. But to you, the tickets were a free gift, given to you by your parents because they love you. The tickets don't really have "value" in and of themselves – they only have "potential" for value. The value of each ticket is realized IF, and ONLY IF, it is redeemed. (Anybody ever go home from the fair with extra tickets you didn't use? You throw them in the trash - they are just pieces of paper – they're not good for anything.)

Now, what's the meaning of this illustration? Simply this: Christ died on the cross to "buy" your salvation. Like your parents at the fair, He "paid the price" for your ticket to heaven. That "ticket" (symbolized in your baptism) has been issued to each of us, regardless of age. EVERYONE is invited into a relationship with God. The "ticket" Christ purchased for each of us is a gracious gift, given freely to us simply because God loves us – not because WE did anything to deserve it, or earn it.

It reminds me of an old Beatles song: "She's got a ticket to ride... but she don't care."

You see, everyone has been given a “ticket” for their salvation – everyone’s “got a ticket to ride.” The tragedy is that so many people fail to ever “redeem” their ticket – “they don’t care.” They hold on to their “ticket” as if it had value in and of itself, and then go to their graves clasping it in their cold-clammy hand.

But like the ticket at the fair, in order for the VALUE of our baptism as infants or young people to be realized, (OR the faith we have inherited from our parents to have any meaning for US), WE have to accept Christ as OUR own personal Savior and Lord. We have to REDEEM our ticket!

And that is what confirmation (or professing your faith) is really all about: You have come this morning ready to “redeem” your ticket to heaven. You are ready to confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and to begin a new adventure in the Christian faith. You’ve to a ticket to ride – and praise God, you do care! And if you mean your vows, that that ticket has power!

But before we do, I want to address those in the congregation: I hope you already know how it feels to give your life to Christ. This morning you also were given a ticket, symbolic of the gift God wants to give you. I hope you care. I hope you have already “redeemed” your ticket.

But perhaps you have never taken that step. Will you go to your grave clasping the ticket of salvation in your lifeless hand, never having bothered to “redeem” it? I certainly hope not! As long as there is breath in your lungs, it’s not too late to cash in your ticket!

My friend, today could be your “therefore moment.” If you have never given your life to Christ, why not do so right now? Once you have made the decision to say “yes” to God, the process is really quite simple. If you are ready to do that, pray this prayer with me:

“O God of mercy and grace: Forgive me for trying to make my way through life without you. Forgive me for turning my back on your offer of salvation through your gift of Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection. Thank you, Jesus, for buying my ticket to heaven. Today I am “redeeming” that ticket – I’m saying “yes” to a relationship with you. Forgive me of all my sins. Draw me ever closer to you, and help me grow in my love for you and for others, so that my new life may always bring you honor and glory! Thank you, Jesus. Amen.”

If you meant what you prayed, you just redeemed your ticket! You have received the Salvation and new life that God wants for you! You are now a redeemed child of God!

Next Sunday, I hope you will let us help you celebrate your new commitment to Christ as you publicly profess your faith in Jesus. We will be receiving new folks into our church as they become a members of this family of believers. We’d love to welcome you!

For the rest of us in worship this morning who have already professed our faith and been baptized: You are invited (as you leave worship this morning) to touch the waters of baptism in the font as a reminder of the gift of Salvation that God has made possible for YOU through Jesus Christ. It’s not “holy water” – its just a reminder that you have been baptized, and all that that means for your life.

And now, finally, to my young confirmands: Today is your “therefore moment” – a moment of transition FROM what has come before in your lives, TO what will follow in your future. It is a moment of confession. It is a moment of decision. It is a moment of commitment. It ought to be a moment of transformation.

As Paul wrote in his letter to Romans: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

David, Juliette, Noah, and Connie, THIS is the moment to redeem your “ticket to heaven.”