

We have all seen. photos of bewildered preschoolers in caps and gowns. They are always cute but miss the point of the moment. Graduation is more than what is behind, or what we have finished. It is really all about what comes next.

We don't graduate from anything but graduate for something. Such a moment announces that one is ready for what comes next. It is not the end but prepares for another step to be taken.

This is relevant today because of our temptation to exhibit similar confusion with our faith journey. For instance, baptism is not merely a guarantee of a reward, but the beginning of a relationship and lifestyle. Confirmation is not the completion of a few years of study but an understanding of and commitment to a growing sense of discipleship and life with God. When we confess our faith, that is not the end of the matter but a realization of the means of coloring life choices.

Consider the woman we just read about in Matthew's Gospel. She was chronically ill and her lifestyle had been adjusted by and to her illness. When she was healed, the most important question was what would come next? Would she live her entire life reliving or dealing with the past? Would she be living with a daily backward glance. Or would she be living her new life and new health?

Healing for her was more than a graduation from a disease. Instead, it was a new freedom and the ability to claim and live a new life!

Faith is all about trust! It is trusting God will make us what we never could have been! Faith is trusting God will bring us to places we never would have imagined living in! And that brings us to the possibility of seeing the graduations, so important in this time of year, in a new light.

Graduation celebrations have meaning only with the next step. Otherwise, the preparations that led to this day have led to nothing but a dead end! Similarly, Christians who know the right words and answers are only preparing for what comes next. Those who know the talk but won't walk the walk are missing the point. Those who profess faith but are unwilling to live by faith have surrendered the most precious gift ever given.

Of course, it isn't easy to live by faith. But neither is the first job, studying in college, raising a family, paying all our bills, or dealing with illness. But in Christ, we are never alone! That is the power and point of the Gospel!

Jesus feeds and leads! He heals and breathes new life! He shows the way and walks with us in that way. Jesus allows us to graduate from sin and sets us free for discipleship, or in other words, living in His Light.

One of saddest of today's watchwords is "whatever!" Think about what a terrible surrender such a phrase is! When there is no center, no focus, no commitment, no passion, no plan, it is obvious there is no faith!

To adopt the stance of “whatever” is like graduating and just waiting to see what happens next. It is like being baptized but not living in that faith. Following Jesus is more decisive and active than simply saying, “whatever.”

Faith calls us to a proactive response, with Christ at the center of every moment!

Just as graduation announces one is ready for next step and willing to journey, so baptism, confirmation, and every recitation of creed or Lord’s Prayer is an announcement that my life will be built and centered on the power of my God.

That is what the words of the prophet meant when people were told that God seeks a steadfast love, not merely and occasional sacrifice. It is all about a daily passion bred out of the love God has filled us with. The prophet message is for us to desire to know God, not simply to leave a gift once in a while. The life of faith is about a consistent and daily sacrifice of love in response to the love that has changed me.

There is a powerful image in any baccalaureate procession. For many years our baccalaureate procession included young people wearing confirmation stoles as a more important symbol than graduation gowns. These were their creation and a reminder they understand what the focus of their future lives will always be.

It is important to celebrate milestones and important moments, but what is more important is what comes next as they make daily choices, for the rest of their lives, regarding vocation, family, lifestyle, and faith.

When discipleship, ministry, and servant love are my vision and my life, everything changes. With Christ as the focus of life there is a new possibility and potential as each decides whether they will always look like a bewildered preschooler or become the maturing person of faith proclaiming discipleship and servant love as the vision for every “follow-me” step they will take in life.

Remember, graduation is never from something, it is for what comes next! -tws