

Alida's Confirmation Homily: "Confirmation"

Some things are a mystery. They just are. Like how the little round things I stuck in the ground last October are now big beautiful tulips or why a marshmallow held over a fire tastes so good or why Angry Birds on our Phones make us so happy These are amazing and mysterious things.

Confirmation at Greenfield Hill Church is one of those mysteries. I would love to be able to explain it, bottle it, package it, write a book about it, share it. But it is too much of a mystery. Last week I got a phone call from the headquarters of our denomination, the United Church of Christ. They wanted to interview me and David for their national newsletter. They had heard that we had one hundred kids in Confirmation Class this year, and they were really excited about what kind of headline that was going to make. Little Known Church in Little Ol' Connecticut has ONE HUNDRED TEENS being confirmed. When I told the guy that it was actually "ONLY" forty-one, truth was, he was still amazed. He ended up interviewing us anyway, trying to figure out what the heck is going on in this little ol' church. It's a mystery.

Much of Jesus' ministry was a mystery. He walked on water, the story says. He rubbed spit on a blind man's eyes and made him see. He fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and a couple fish. He healed one woman without even knowing it, she just touched his robe and that was it. We'd love to be able to break down each one of those mysteries and tell you how it happened. What's the key to walking on water, for instance? Do you just step softly, just the right

way, kind of glide across? How do you feed so many people with so little food? This would be great to know. And how much spit really does the trick for miraculous healings? And why spit? What's up with that? No, these are mysteries. Just like Confirmation Class at Greenfield Hill.

Here's what goes on. Every Monday night, forty one teenagers pile into the Len Morgan Youth Barn, sprawl over beat-up couches and talk about the meaning of life, the meaning of their lives, the meaning of the universe, the heart of Christianity, the meaning of Jesus' life and what it means to be the best possible human being you can be in a Christlike way. It's Monday night, they've been in school all day they've had after-school sports and lessons and homework and some haven't had time yet for dinner. And yet week after week in they come attendance is amazing, 100% a lot of nights.

And they are wonderful. David pointed out to them at the last class that with 41 of them and just two of us, on any given night if they got tired of us, they could have just wrapped us up in duct tape and stuck us up in the Barn attic for an hour. I'm kind of glad he didn't point that out at the first class. But the truth is, week after week, no matter what we were talking about, they were into it with their whole hearts, they made the mystery of Confirmation deeper, richer, more amazing every week.

It IS a mystery.

Did you happen to be at the Easter early service this year?

Every year the Confirmation class leads the service, develops it start to finish. This

year, with the largest Confirmation Class in, we suspect, the church's entire history, we had the hugest early service ever. We had preachers and bible readers and 41 prayers. We had a guitar solo of Amazing Grace, and string quintet playing Stairway to Heaven, and a beautiful solo, and heavenly harp music, and an exquisite violin piece., and sermons that made it crystal clear what church is all about. How did it happen? Well, that's a mystery. We had no rehearsal. We just spent time talking at class about the meaning of Easter, and the power of our faith, and what it means that life and love always get the last word. And then they led worship. Just another mystery.

In a few minutes we'll share in the final mystery of Confirmation. One by one all those teens will come up here and kneel down and we'll place our hands on their heads and bless them. We'll speak about each one of them through three adjectives and one noun that describes who they are, and what gift they bring this church. We'll pray for them. And years from now, years and years from now, those words will ring in their ears, guiding their lives and their choices, empowering their faith and their love. All because of nine months of Monday nights, thirty seconds of laying on of hands, and four special words.

The way we do Confirmation should be chaos. It isn't.

It probably shouldn't work. It does.

By the book, everything we do is wrong. But it's right.

It's a mystery. A wonderful, wonderful, wonderful mystery, just like our whole Christian faith here at Greenfield Hill Church.

A wonderful, blessed, mystery.

David's Homily – "Community"

Alida is big on confidentiality. I mean really big! If something amazing happens at our high school youth group on Thursday and I mention it in a sermon on Sunday, I'm in big trouble. So what I'm about to suggest will never happen, but I'd still love to do it. One year I'd love to videotape the confirmation class from the very first minute of the very first class in the fall till the last minute of our last class in May.

This is what we would see: in early fall, 6:50 on a Monday night, kids start strolling into the barn. Other than the Johnson boys, they come in one at a time, very much one at a time. Silent. Nervous. Alone. They look around furtively, hoping for a friendly face, someone, at least one person they know from the school bus or homeroom or Little League or youth soccer or Sunday School. The place is quiet, eerily quiet.

I try to talk to some of them, and I can almost hear the voices in their heads, "Oh, no, the old man is talking to me. The old minister is talking to me ... Is this a test? What if I say the wrong thing?"

They are so glad when I walk away to torture some other poor kid. As they imagine, I grill them about grades and sports. And do they love Jesus? And are they nice to their mothers? And what were the last books they read? And name all the books of the Bible. And can they explain the Trinity? And what do they want to be when they grow up?

And then class begins. "Oh, no," I hear them all thinking in their heads, "the old man is talking on and on, and he's talking, and he's looking right at me. He's looking right through me! He knows my every thought! Oh, no, he wants somebody to read out loud ... he wants ME to read out loud! I'm going to die right here, right now. *I am going to die*. I have to read out loud, one of HIS POEMS ... Wait! Everyone's listening to me! When I'm done, they applaud! Wow! I didn't think that would happen, that was pretty cool."

I'd love the video camera to capture those first 20 minutes and then follow us for nine months as we wrestle and laugh and question and prank and joke and debate our way through the history of religion, the history of Judaism, the history of Christianity, the history of us, the history of each of

them! We joke and we laugh, we provoke and we push and listen and share, and we learn about salvation and inspiration and mission and sacraments, and we learn a whole lot about Jesus.

We always start Confirmation class with a trick question: "What is Confirmation?" And every year kids look for a deep theological, Biblical, holy sounding answer. Finally somebody says, "It means to confirm something!" Exactly. Confirmation means to confirm the path that your parents set for you when you were baptized, when you were brought to Sunday School and church as a little kid. Now we're confirming that it is real for you, that it's your choice, that it's important to you.

We trace the idea of Confirmation to Acts 11, which tells us that there was a surprising outbreak of Christianity at Antioch. So the Disciples sent some folks to Antioch to confirm that it was real. Verse 23 says. "When they arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, they were glad and encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts." And then there's this interesting little tidbit, verse 26, "They were first called Christians in Antioch."

That's the first time, the first place that we had an identity. We were Christians. We were Christ followers. This is who we are. This is how we want to be known. This is our "community."

Confirmation at Greenfield Hill Church is a lot of things. Noise. Laughter. Conversation. Questions. Flirting. Pillow fights. More noise. Dialogue. Debate. Differences. More questions. More laughter. Intense. Fun. Deep. And all along the way, we're building a community, a little town, a fellowship of friends, who grow up to know and care about one another. This year, 41 kids from eight different schools, 41 very different people, but somehow, through some magic or mystery or miracle, we become our own little corner of the world, and it's a nice place.

Last Monday we had our closing banquet, a little mini-retreat that's become something of a tradition. It starts when we all go out to the Memorial Garden. We gather around a big beautiful wooden cross, nestled in among all the memories planted there, buried there, blooming there. And I start to talk to them about life and death and drugs and hopes and fears and doubts and eternal life and loving one another and forgiveness and about you, Greenfield Hill Church, their church, our church.

And, as I often do, I'm going on and on, one story after another, "One more point and I'm done, I promise." And I look at them. And every single one of them is listening. It's 7 o'clock. They've been in school all day. They've been in Confirmation class all year. It's cold. There's a slight drizzle. Dinner is waiting in the Memorial Room. And they're all listening to me like maybe this is important, like maybe they believe. Like maybe they are confirming what was started in their lives years ago.

After dinner, we close with an unusual little worship, blending two songs together. One from the dark side. One from the bright side. The dark side song chants of all that's wrong with the world, yelling out "killers, demons, liars," daring us to feel "the haunting presence" of evil. The bright side song is by our own John Giannicchi, "Johnny Boots," from his first CD. A very personal, realistic, practical song about life and faith, daring us to rise above boredom, apathy, cynicism, and to reach for the Promised Land in this life, right now, today. Then we bring them all together in a closing litany, which I invite you to share right now.

Litany:

David: Can you feel the haunting presence?

CONFIRMANDS: Yes, but we will not be haunted, we are too strong!

David: Can you feel the haunting presence? Do you know about liars and killers and demons?

CONFIRMANDS: Yes, we know, but we do not tremble, we will not be afraid. This world is ours, this life is ours, and we go with God.

**PEOPLE: “Alarm clock rings at 6 a.m., start your day, prepare for them.
Work all day, the nighttime, too. Tell me, is this the life for you?
You can’t run and you can’t hide, it’s only you that can decide. What
you do and what you say; breathing Life into another day.”**

**CONFIRMANDS: “We’ll choose our path and make it clear; make it ours,
won’t live in fear. Be ourselves, won’t give in, use our gifts and let
our lives begin. So it’s all for one and one for all, trust in God, break
down the wall. Someday we’ll understand, find ourselves in the
Promised Land.”**