

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: May 1, 2016
Sermon Title: What Is Confirmation Anyway?
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Acts 11:19-24

Acts 11:19-24

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord.

You're here at our 9 o'clock service with its own special emphasis today. Our Sunday School kids have been learning about Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, so today the kids and teachers joined us to take Holy Communion with us.

In fact, Alida and I are preparing a very special, *very special* Communion Sunday for October, where everything in the service, from beginning to end, will be about Communion. We'll do it, we'll explain it all. We'll think it through. We'll go back in time, look at its roots. We'll make the bread; we may even have some homemade wine. So Holy Communion is part of the specialness of today.

But above all, today is Confirmation Sunday at our 10:30 service, and that service truly is Confirmation. From beginning to end, everything about the entire 60 minutes is focused on the 40 8th-graders being confirmed. As many of you know, I'm actually a Baptist, and Baptists do things differently. In a Baptist church, a newborn baby is brought to church to be dedicated, *not*

baptized. *Dedicated*. Dedication is part thanksgiving and part giving the baby back to God. It's a way of saying, "God, we're grateful for this life, this baby, and now we want you to take charge of this baby, take hold of him or her and use them mightily.

Then, when they get to be teenagers, they are encouraged to get baptized, to make the decision on their own to follow Christ, to become a Christian. And they show that by walking into a big tank of water or a lake or a river, and they get dunked, immersed; they are fully submerged under water. It's a powerful physical symbol of sins washed away, of new life beginning in Christ.

So, when you folks were deciding to call me to be your pastor, people wondered how would I go from being a Baptist to a Congregationalist, from baptizing adults to baptizing babies. My answer was simple: As long as we have really meaningful Confirmation, where our teenagers really are challenged to know Christ, to understand God, to think about faith, to confront their own questions, to work through their beliefs, then it's all fine. The overall idea is still the same: we thank God for babies, and we make our young people stand up on their own two feet in faith. So, yes, Confirmation is a really big deal in our Church. We even polish the silver for the coffee hour afterward! Confirmation is so much fun at our Church that many adults have asked us to conduct a mini-Confirmation for adults!

Some of us grew up Catholic; some of us grew up Protestant. Some of us grew up Jewish. Some of us in other religions. And let's face it, for all of us, those Confirmation and CCD classes, First Communions, Bar Mitzvahs, Sunday School classes were a long time ago. Me, I had it a lot tougher than any of you. When I got confirmed, my father was my pastor, *and* he was my Confirmation teacher. Plus, in addition, he made us do the "Baltimore Catechism" as well, which is the Catholic curriculum for Confirmation! I kept telling him, "But, Dad, we're not Catholic," to which he responded something like "Shut up and memorize." Plus, my father made us all preach, each teenager in the Confirmation-Baltimore Catechism-Christianity 101 Boot Camp.

Plus, my father still had me get baptized! Yes, there's more. The week after Confirmation, we all had to get dressed up again, and we had to march in a parade throughout our neighborhood, at the head of the parade, each of us wearing a big white sash across our chests with the phrase "Confirmand!"

You see, this was in Queens, the home of the only Protestant holiday in America. Some called it "Brooklyn-Queens Day," some called it "Sunday School Day," since it was in honor of the founders of Sunday School in

America. We Protestants got the day off from school, all the Churches joined together, floats, marching bands, kids on tricycles with streamers on the wheels, and yes, the Confirmation Class marching at the front.

Confirmation was really special. We don't have a parade, but Confirmation is really special at Greenfield Hill too! Every Monday night we gather in the Barn, and week by week we take them on a journey of faith. We begin at zero, with nothing, and have them imagine a world with no religion, no church, no nothing. Just those long-ago humans trying to figure out what's what, what's important, and, no pun intended, the genesis of religion. We even invite them to create their own religion, deciding first what, or who, is God, and then developing a religion around that idea: rules and regulations, doctrines, rituals, leadership, the soup to nuts of organized religion.

That really does parallel the Old Testament, and we go through that leading up to God's decision to intervene on earth, to become God in flesh, the incarnation, Emmanuel, as we sing at Christmas "God with us," Jesus. We look at Jesus's life, his teachings, whom he hung with, what he did, how he changed things. And then, the Church, us, this place: What is it? Why should they care? Where is this Church in their lives?

Our challenge is to make it *not* be another class. They've all just been in school all day, sports practices and music lessons and homework after school, and their parents drop them off to us. So we decided years ago it can't be another class. So it's interactive, even hyperactive; lots of visuals, discussion, provocation; lots of laughter and shouting; lots of insight, questions, wisdom.

And then last Monday we gathered for a final dinner together, a real sit-down dinner. But first we took them out into the Memorial Garden, gathered them around the Cross, told them about some of dear loved ones buried out there, about life and death, and all the challenges in between. And we explained the absolute 100 percent bottom line heart of the Gospel, heart of this Church, their Church: God loves you. *God loves you*. First, last, and foremost. God loves you.

That's Confirmation at Greenfield Hill. Who knows, maybe we will do a one-day refresher course on Confirmation: fun, snacks, questions, role-play, and the Cross, all leading up to one conclusion: God loves you.

And now, let's stand and sing together Hymn No. 608, "I Would Be True."

*I would be true, for there are those who trust me;
I would be pure, for there are those who care;
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare.*

*I would be friend of all—the foe, the friendless;
I would be giving, and forget the gift;
I would be humble, for I know my weakness;
I would look up, and laugh, and love, and lift;
I would look up, and laugh, and love, and lift.*