

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: May 5, 2019  
Sermon Title: "Love: The Best Confirmation"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

The first time I went to Africa was in 1975. I was a Baptist pastor, and I was going to see our Baptist missions at work and to understand the famine sweeping across sub-Saharan Africa and to attend the world Council of Churches meeting in Kenya and to understand "apartheid" by going to South Africa.

I was excited beyond imagination. A week before, a highly respected pastor from a nearby town came to see me in my house. He greeted me with a big hug, shook my hand powerfully, "You're going to Africa, good. What are you going to do?" He asked. "You're going to preach the gospel?" "Yes," I replied. "You're going to do mass Baptisms?" "Yes." "You're going to encounter the missionaries?" "Yes, for sure!" He was very pleased, all the time he's vigorously shaking my hand, and then he says, "What else?" So I tell him about the famine in Africa and apartheid and the big ecumenical meeting of Christians in Kenya. At that he scowled, shook loose from my hand, stepped back, and said, "Those people need the Bible, not food." He muttered something about communists, turned around, and walked out the door.

I tell that story so you understand about Confirmation at Greenfield Hill Church. Sometime during our Confirmation year I tell the kids how easy they have it. They don't really, but I tell them that anyway. Old guys are supposed to talk like that, right? So I tell them, when I was Confirmed, it was two years long, my father was my teacher, we had two textbooks we had to memorize, we had tests; *and* for those of you who are Catholic, my Protestant father made us Protestant kids learn the entire *Baltimore Catechism*, the Confirmation class material of the Catholic Church. *And* I'm not done yet! On Confirmation Sunday each kid had to preach a sermon!

So, O.K., on one level, our kids today do have it easier. No textbooks. No 2,000 questions to answer. No tests. No *Baltimore Catechism* and Apostles' Creed to memorize. No sermon to write. BUT. And this is a really, really big BUT. But these kids, our Confirmation Class, they have to *love*. Monday after Monday, Bible story after Bible story. Lesson after lesson. Topic after topic. We hammered home *love*. That's why we picked today's Scripture. It comes from the last night of Jesus's life, at his Last Supper, hours before he's killed, and what's on his mind?

He says, "A new commandment I give you: Love one another." A new commandment: Love. "Love one another," Jesus says. "God is love," the Bible says. "For God so loved the world," the Bible says. "Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself," Jesus says. "Faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love," the Bible says.

Now, let me ask you a serious question. A serious question. Not rhetorical. Not satirical. Serious. Which is the tougher Confirmation route? Learn the *Baltimore Catechism*? The history of Martin Luther, the Pilgrims, and the United Church of Christ? Explain the Apostles' Creed, the Trinity, the Sacraments, the Covenant, Transubstantiation, heaven, and hell . . . OR . . . Living a life of love? Being as loving as God? Just loving, period, day in and day out? Do people really think that's easy?

Over the course of my career, I've had plenty of people mock this emphasis on love; they call it "religion-light" or fake Christianity or wimpy, feel-good, happy sappy, liberal Kumbaya Church. They've said that to my face. We have a Jesus whose last command is to love; who goes to the Cross to prove it; and when we try to live it, it's dismissed as "light stuff," not serious.

I'll use myself as an example. I'm a fairly straightforward Orthodox Christian. A lot of the stuff in the Bible that makes people roll their eyes, I believe. The Virgin Birth. Jesus walking on water. A bodily resurrection. A literal heaven. Daniel surviving the lion's den. Just this week in Bible Study I taught about Jonah getting swallowed by the whale and living to tell about it. The Apostles' Creed. The Ten Commandments.

Hey, I passed my father's Confirmation Class; that stuff is easy. Heck, hating is easy. Prejudice is easy. Selfishness is easy. Sin is easy. Getting up every morning determined to be a loving person: now that's hard. We're not talking about loving our best friend, our mom, our favorite teacher, the people who agree with us or some boy or girlfriend, future husband or wife, or our children. We're talking about being loving, thinking loving, doing loving all the time in every circumstance with everyone. As Jesus said. As if Jesus meant it.

I'll close with this. All year long we engage in discussion with the Confirmation kids. They talk, argue, listen. They draw stuff, read stuff, write stuff. In the beginning of the year, they put down their expectations, all very noble and hopeful. At the end, they put down what it's all about, what they've learned, what they're going to do with it. One said, "I love God. God loves me. I'm going to be more loving."

That's Confirmation at Greenfield Hill. We're sending 48 lovers out into the world. We call that "Christlikeness."