

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: What Is Confirmation?
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What's going on today? We call it "Confirmation Sunday," but what is it? Historically, Biblically, the idea of Confirmation goes back to very early Christianity. Christianity, believing in Jesus, following Jesus, began in Israel among Jews. It was a movement entirely within Judaism.

On Friday, Alida and I attended a most extraordinary lecture by a noted rabbi, and he reminded us of those early days when Jews and followers of Jesus were absolutely swirling around one another, linked in every way. Our spiritual and physical DNA truly matched, including this very Holy Communion we just shared.

We, on the Christian side of things, we were founded by a Jewish Jesus, led by Jewish disciples, attracting Jewish believers, all headquartered in Jerusalem. Then, all of a sudden, those Jewish Israeli followers of Jesus get a surprising report: interest in Christianity, decisions to follow Christ, desire to be Christlike had popped up outside of Israel, in a foreign country, away from the center, not connected to the movement.

Remember, this is before there was a New Testament to read, before there was a Christian religion to join, before there was an Internet to spread info; and yet, far away from the heartbeat of Christianity, far away from the leadership, the movement, the birthplace, something was happening. Unlikely people were choosing Christ. Could this be legitimate? Real? Can we trust the report? Coming from such an unlikely place? Antioch, in Syria, among Greeks! For its time, this was unheard of, shocking. In those days, people stuck to their own religion among their own people in their own place. Even if you had to move, you found your own people doing your own same religion. "Birds of a feather flock together."

Suddenly, the thoroughly Jewish followers of the thoroughly Jewish Jesus, all from Israel, discovered there were Greeks living in Syria, choosing to believe in Jesus Christ.

What to do? The answer? Confirmation. Jewish believers in Jesus living in Jerusalem sent a man named Barnabas to the foreign city of Antioch in the

foreign country of Syria to meet these foreign Greeks who, like them, believed in Jesus Christ. Why? To confirm. To confirm that the reports were true, that the Greeks did believe, that even in Syria people got it right.

Confirmation is something we do all the time, in Church life, in personal life. You make a play date for your child with another family. Sure, you talked about it, maybe even emailed. But the day before, maybe even an hour before, you check to confirm it's still on. Your business interview, vacation travel plans, people are coming for dinner, and with each occasion, you will confirm it. Every doctor's appointment you make nowadays includes a phone call the day before from the doctor's office to confirm that what was agreed upon, what was set in motion, is still real.

That's what Barnabas did in Antioch with the Greeks. That's what we're doing at our 10:30 service today, confirming 48 teenagers in their faith. That's the largest Confirmation class in my life, the largest in our Church history. I want you to rejoice in them, be proud, thank God. Because, just like in Antioch in Syria, something wonderful is happening here. And I thought I'd give you a feel for it, very briefly.

Let's start with what we are confirming. Well, it goes back to our kids' Baptisms. A baby gets born, parents are happy, they want to thank God and give their child a first step, literally a "baby step" into faith. So the baby gets to be a few months old, and the family comes here on a Sunday morning to baptize that tiny bundle of life who knows nothing at all, who may well sleep or scream through the whole thing. The key actors in every Baptism are the parents, the godparents, and we, the baby's Church. We make all the promises. Together, in one form or another, we promise to raise that child in faith, to provide every opportunity, every opportunity for the child to know God, to learn God's ways, to understand the person and purpose of Christ, to explore, fully explore all the touchstones of spiritual life and questions and mysteries, to find in this Church a whole family of people who will be Christlike evidence in their lives: Sunday School teachers, youth group leaders, wise elders and good friends, ASP work crew teammates, and one day, Confirmation mentor. Men and women who will stand alongside them, giving them every confidence that God is love, that Christ is alive and Church family is real.

And we give them a Bible. They are babies at Baptism, and we give them a Bible. In third grade we give them another Bible. And when Confirmation begins, we give them another Bible. And then, this whole past year, every Monday night we shake the Bible hard, turn it inside out, we have it come alive, we act it out. We learn to use it, question it, trust it, push it, apply it, live it, love it.

We Confirm, Confirm that what we started at the baptismal font 13 years ago, what started with all our promises is taking root.

All right, let's be honest, especially here at our 9 o'clock service I can say this because our 48 Confirmation Class kids aren't here, their parents aren't here. So let's admit at age 13 or 14 these kids are not finished products at anything. Not in math, not in sports, not in music, and not in Christian faith. They are unfinished . . . and aren't we all! There is not a single one of us who's done with our spiritual journey. Just this week alone, I spent time with 20 people over the age of 90, two over 100, and those people, every single one of them, is growing in faith, growing in understanding, growing in a desire to know God.

Remember the chorus from the musical "Godspell"? It's in our hymnbook:

*Day by day, day by day.
O, dear Lord, three things I pray:
to see thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
follow thee more nearly
day by day."*

That's what my 90- and 100-year-olds are doing. That's what today's Confirmation Class is doing. And that's what this 294-year-old Greenfield Hill Church is doing.