

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, May 31, 2009
Acts 2:1-21; Confirmation/Pentecost Sunday
Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

It was the Tuesday afternoon class following the week after Easter – you remember we had the Integrity choir here - one of the confirmands asked perhaps the most profound question I've ever heard in a confirmation class: why is it that the church is packed on Christmas and Easter but the rest of the Sundays of the year it isn't. I'm here with my family every week – don't people know that they should be here all the time, not just those special days?

I asked the class what they thought and the response was quick and loud and varied – they didn't have a good answer any more than I did – but this question led us to a great discussion about what the church really is – what they wanted from the church, what they wanted to give back to the church.

It was clear that they saw the church as much more than a building – the church is about God – first, last, and always. Our curriculum this year was broken into three sections: knowing God, finding God, serving God – based around the 3 reasons for the church to exist: worship – teaching – serving. Every activity tied into these sections, these reasons, and the task was and is to integrate them into a life of discipleship. And, of course, this doesn't end with confirmation – this is an important highlight of the journey but only a milestone, not the end. We all spend a lifetime trying to discern, to develop our discipleship.

I asked them to write a letter to the church: what it means to them, how they see it as a part of their lives, how they can serve the church, serve God, today and in the future. And I learned a lot about these confirmands when I read their thoughts and want to share some of them with you because this church is important to these young people and they challenge each of us to think more deeply about our relationship to the church and each other. Not just on Christmas and Easter. And not just on Sunday but everyday.

Many of them see the church as a safe place – a nurturing place. One wrote, “You have helped my life and others in many ways. Recently I found out that I need you, church. You are a great spiritual home.”

Another: “The church is such a great place – always available to anyone who needs it. This year I have begun the process of becoming a member of the church – throughout this process I have strengthened my relationship with God. I feel that when I pray the connection between us is becoming stronger.”

From another: “I believe that faith is very important to all people, but especially the young people of the church. This is a time of change in our lives, when the burdens of school and what to do with our lives bear down the hardest. In these times the church provides a foundation in which one can relax and let their life come to peace. I thank you.”

Gratitude is a common theme: “Thank you, church, for providing me a place to go and become closer with God.”

“The church has helped me spiritually. I feel as if the church is a sanctuary and a place of peace.”

“Especially this year the church has become a major part of my life. Even after I have the choice of whether or not I will attend, I will still go. Praying helps me, especially with my stressful education. The church is almost a second home.”

“My faith in God is very important to me. The church means a lot to me – I want to be able to learn about God and God’s ways. I want to be able to come to church every Sunday and worship and be brought together with the other members of the church and the neighborhood.”

“I will be a member of the church soon and I can’t wait. Worship is one of the main parts of the church – the connection to God. Worship is when you talk to God and ask for forgiveness or pray. The music helps get me into the worship – it sets the mood of the worship.” Lots of comments about the music – loved Integrity Choir – and a number of requests for different instruments along with the piano and organ – stay tuned for opportunities on Youth Sunday and especially this summer for that.

Knowing God – that life long process begins in worship. Our confirmands understand that. There’s a lesson for all of us here – isn’t there.

There’s a heavy emphasis on service in the confirmation classes – grounded in Jesus’ teachings – we do service for one reason: because Jesus tells us to. The benefits are far reaching and even life changing! Each completed at least 3 projects and one with their sponsors. Have you noticed the flowers planted in front of the sanctuary and in the garden by the sign? That was a group project led by one of our confirmands and her sponsor. The entire class participated in the planting one beautiful Tuesday afternoon. One of the confirmands and her sponsor introduced us to Kiva – an opportunity to change lives around the world – and to do that, each one of the confirmands and some of the sponsors provided homemade goodies for the bake sale a couple of weeks ago.

They did so many different things: they spent evenings with our IHN guests together. And many of the confirmands and sponsors worked the rummage sales or the antique show together – they loved it! And they loved the opportunity to get to know their sponsors better by working along side of them.

There’s a key here to church at its best: not only do we worship together – that’s first for the confirmands – but we learn and serve together. We get to know each other by spending time together, bound together in a common goal. And as we do that, the church community becomes stronger. What’s striking to me is how many of the confirmands talked about how they share our message with families and friends: they don’t realize it but they are awesome evangelists! And we would do well to follow their lead.

One of them became involved in the church about a year ago on the invitation of one of her friends – she wrote, “when I came, I felt welcomed because I had friends in the church but – here she adds a caution - not every new member does. We should all try our best to notice new members because it would be great to have new people with new beliefs and ideas. The whole community should be involved in something that helps others. This way people can meet others while doing something good. Then maybe more people will want to come to our church or will just be inspired to be a more active member in helping others. I love coming to this church and I know others feel that way

too. Everyone should be able to share our church with us and the caring people who are a part of it.”

From another: I really do think that one of the most important things to attract others to the church is to appeal to all types of people – this sounds like Pentecost to me – a gathering of people from all around, each finding God in their own language. She goes on to say, “Also, people need to start interacting more with others at coffee hour because the way the people are at church, the new members see how the church has rubbed off on them or just how the whole congregation shows how friendly they are. People need to want to come back – we need better ways to reach out to people who are new to town.”

Another comment: the church should have more community events – these gatherings will let people know that our church is very family oriented – adults will become members of the church and bring their kids.

Another: the church is located right in the middle of the town – however, people don’t know that it is a congregational church or that it is open for everyone to join. “Think about it,” he says, “the more people that come, they can tell their friends and family how great it really is, and soon the whole town will know.”

Our confirmands “get” evangelism even though they don’t use that word or perhaps even think of their invitations to others in that way. And they did invite their friends to participate: one of them served at the Bethel Love food distribution one Saturday and brought a friend with him. There were even a few times when friends came with them to class! And to have one of our confirmands here today because of an invitation from another – what a lesson for each of us! And what a challenge for us to step up to!

Worship – teaching – service – that’s the basic curriculum for the confirmation classes – seems like it’s also the basic curriculum for all of us as church community – first, to ground ourselves in worship of God – to live in an attitude of gratitude for all that God has given us – to turn to God both in good times and in tough times. To open ourselves to the moving of the spirit in and through us as we turn to God in prayer and praise.

And that spirit will work in and through each of us – we’ll continue to learn what it means to be a disciple of Christ – we’ll hear the stories over and over again so that they become a part of who we are – we’ll teach each other, we’ll learn from each other. We won’t always agree with each other but we’re all in this together, grounded in love of God and love of neighbor. And then we’ll go forth and make disciples – we’ll serve our neighbor – in large and small ways – but we’ll always serve. That’s the confirmation class model and a model, I believe, appropriate for each of us as members of the Body of Christ. These confirmands love their church and want others to experience that same joy and welcome and even challenge they feel. They won’t let us down – and we cannot let them down either. With God’s help, we won’t.

It is always an honor to walk with this class on their journey to confirmation when they say “yes” for themselves to those same questions their parents answered on their baptism. Our church is strengthened, made more complete, by their participation – and they model for us a way of living their faith. By being in worship. In class. In the world making their contribution, serving as they have been served. Their enthusiasm is contagious!

I keep hearing it said that the youth are the future of the church – well, friends, they're not – they're the present of the church. We are all together in one place – just as those early disciples were when they heard the sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

We're all here together in one place, trying to discern what God is calling forth from us. We need each other to be church at its best. In fact, to be church *at all* for church is never an individual effort. Our confirmands know that – in fact, many of them expressed gratitude for the opportunity to get to know each other better in class, in worship, in working together, and having lots of fun together. And they look forward to more!

Thank you, confirmands, for your spirit – for your willingness to be honest – for your enthusiasm – for your faith sharing – most of all, for being you – my brothers and sisters in Christ. Welcome as you take your places as confirmed members of the Body of Christ – you always were part of the Body but today you said yes for yourselves to continue on this awesome, lifelong journey of becoming disciples of Christ! It won't always be easy but you're not alone – you have a whole community of people who will walk with you – we made promises too this morning. We're all in this together and that's the joy of church – not just on the great festival days of Christmas and Easter but today and every day.

God bless you this day and always – and again, welcome! We are glad you're here.

Let us pray:

We thank you for this group of young people who today affirm their baptism in the rite of confirmation. We thank you that they take their place as members of the church with all the freedom and responsibility and accountability that comes with that. Strengthen their commitment, renew our commitment, to witness to the Spirit's power. Give each of us the ability through the Spirit to spread its fruits to a hurting, divided world, so often bent on its own destruction.

Spirit of beauty, Spirit of love, Spirit of hope, comforting Spirit, healing Spirit, patient Spirit, Spirit of peace, Holy Spirit of God, descend upon our hearts and abide now and forevermore. Amen.