

That You May Know the Hope
A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman on Confirmation Sunday
May 4, 2008

Today I want to be informal in my reflections as a way of saying what I think it means to be confirmed by the church. A group of youth in our congregation met last fall during the Sunday School hour to explore faith and to talk about who we are as Christians. They were led by Jeanine Siler Jones for the first half of the year, and by Chris and Martha Stockwell-Goering the last half – along with Amanda and myself. It was the start of a journey that has led some of our youth to decide today that they are ready to be confirmed, to join the church, and for others to decide they are not yet ready. I want to say that we affirm each and every one of our youth, we affirm them as persons and we affirm the decisions each has made about their faith and confirmation. Furthermore, I want to express my deep gratitude for the care with which many youth and their parents have explored this. While confirmation is for some just a rite of passage, just what a youth whose family goes to church does, I have witnessed youth thinking long and hard about this – trying to make honest decisions that have integrity for them. I thank you for that.

Whatever decision each of you as our youth have made about today, I want you to know that this is not the end. While our journey as a confirmation class will finish up in 2 more weeks, your decision is really a beginning. A new start. For those who have chosen not to join, we in the congregation will continue to share the exploring and the questioning of faith with you. We will continue to be your partner along the way. We can and will walk hand in hand, side by side.

For those who choose to affirm their baptism today in the act of confirmation, you are making a faith statement about your intention to be Christian. To live in the ways of Jesus. To learn the ways of Jesus. To love in the ways of Jesus. To be gracious and forgiving in the way of Jesus. To ground yourself in a way of being that lives in relationship with God, with self, with neighbor, and with Earth in such a way that the power and mystery of God may increase in you and among us.

To put it another way, you are today making the decision to follow your ancestors of faith in a path of living that not everyone will take. You are choosing to place Christ at the center of your life. You are choosing to think about the world, to think about politics, to think about how you shop and what you buy, to think about how you use the resources of Earth, to think about how you relate to the person sitting beside you in school that does not fit in with the crowd, to think about what you will do with your life – how you will use your mind and your body – to think about all these things with your faith in Christ at the very center of your being.

Your commitment to Christ becomes **the main thing**. Not just one other thing, but the main thing that guides your life. Let us all take a minute and just think on that. Our commitment to Christ becomes the main thing, not just one more thing, but the main thing. Jesus called the disciples and said – come and follow me. And they left everything behind to follow. Following Jesus was the main thing. Jesus taught his followers what the Jewish ancestors had taught him – that the main thing is to love God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul – and to love your neighbor as yourself. The main thing. To love your enemy. To welcome the stranger. To care for the poor and the lonely. To visit the sick and those in prison. The main thing. Not just an accessory. Not just if there is time. But the main thing.

But it is not a drudgery. It is a joy. It is what we want to do. Because we have seen the power of God in the midst of the ways of Jesus. We have seen the power of God's healing touch. The power of God's grace. The power of love. We know it is this power that can bring about a world where peace is possible.

But while it is not a drudgery, it is not always easy either. I know that I am getting old, but I can still remember being a teenager. I remember the peer pressure I felt when my friends would put down others at school who were not popular, who were considered odd in some way. I always felt I should be different somehow, should not go along with the crowd in making fun of these students. But I was so eager to belong, to have some sense of being important, that it was hard. I tried my best, and I went to my church eager to learn how to be a Christian when others around me did not seem to be trying very hard. I remember going to a guest pastor one night after a revival service, and asking for help with a situation at school where a group of youth were badmouthing another group – and the pastor basically said – oh, you don't need to do anything about that. That's what it means to be a youth. Just let it go.

But that answer didn't work for me. I couldn't let it go. Didn't want to let it go. I wanted to be one who lived in the ways of Jesus. I believed in Jesus. I wanted to deepen that love inside of me. I could see how it hurt those at school who were being made fun of. I knew it wasn't right to do this. I didn't like myself when I participated in it. But I struggled to find the courage and the know how to do something different.

In looking back today, I realize that no one was teaching me about conflict resolution, about peace making, about loving as Jesus loved. We talked about it. We prayed about it at youth group meetings. But we really were not learning skills to help us live this way. So today, I want to say to you – you are not alone. We will walk with you. I urge you to bring your questions to us. I urge you to share with us what you long to know, what you need help with in living this life you are choosing to live. And I say to all of us in the congregation, this is what we will make a promise to do today. We will promise to be partners in this journey. Not to leave them stranded in the hard places of life. We will

walk with them, we will cry with them, we will question with them, we will study and learn with them.

Making this decision to live in the ways of Jesus does not mean you have it all figured out. That's okay. I'm glad you don't have it all figured out, because I have been working on this for 49 years and I have two theological degrees and I don't have it all figured out. And to let you in on a secret, no one here today has it all figured out. If you meet someone who has all the answers, then be very careful around that person. Faith is not about having it all figured out, or about understanding God and Jesus fully. Paul writes in the New Testament about now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Now we know in part, then we shall know fully. It is not meant for us to know everything. And having faith does not mean we have it all figured out.

Faith means that we have a desire to learn. That we have made a commitment to live in the ways of Jesus, that we seek to have the presence of God deep inside of us – even when we don't know who God is. So please, keep asking your questions. Keep thinking. We do not believe in a God that is lost in the past. We believe in a still speaking, still acting, still loving God. We believe in a God that continues to move among us and empower us in all we do. So pay attention to your own life experiences. Let them guide you. Deepen your capacity to know God by taking time to be still and present with God. Find your way to pray. Experiment with this until you find what works for you. There is not just one way. Find your way even as you seek to live in Jesus way. Jesus did not call us to all be the same. We must honor the unique individuals that we are. But we live our lives in community. We need each other. We better know ourselves as we know others. We learn how to pray, how to love, how to forgive – as we seek to be a community with one another.

What I want most for you is for you to know the hope to which you have been called. Those words come from the text that Ben Herman read for us a little while ago. Being a member of the church is not just about knowing our history. It is living faithfully today, with energy and excitement. If being together here as a church is not exciting, if it is not challenging, if it is not full of hope and joy, we are doing something wrong. I made the decision to be Christian, to live in the ways of Jesus, because I found it to be very exciting. Scary yes. But exciting. I felt the call of God in my life. I felt the encouragement of the church surrounding me – even if they didn't always know how to help me. I knew they prayed for me. I knew they honored the gifts God had given me. And they taught me to believe that God's vision for our life is indeed possible. And that God would give us the strength and the spirit to live this way – and the more we longed for it, the more open we became to this spirit, the more God would come and fill us with Spirit.

So I say to you today. I (we) do not cease to give thanks for you. We remember you in our prayers, and we ask that God who empowered Jesus may also empower you, that

God will give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation, that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened, that you may know the hope to which you have been called – which is found in the great power of God in each of us and in all of us.

What a joy to be able to share with you today in this moment. And what a joy for all of us to remember our own baptism, our own confirmation – or whatever it was called in your faith tradition – to remember that moment when each of us stood before a group of people who loved us and promised to support us. May each of us remember the hope we once knew, the hope we have longed for, the hope that calls us still.

Amen.