

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
January 17, 2010
Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11
Confirmation Sunday

The Lord delights in you, Isaiah tells the people of Israel. “You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married.” The people who have been in exile, far away from their homeland, in a place without their Temple, their culture, their language, their traditions, who have been humiliated in the eyes of the nations, who lost their national independence, will be brought home, and vindicated. Those who have been desolate will be a delight. Those who were forsaken will be remembered and forgiven and loved again. That is God’s promise. That is what God will do.

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit”, Paul instructs the Corinthians. “and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character”, declared the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

On this day when eight young people profess their Christian faith and take vows of church membership, I want to use our scripture readings from Isaiah and 1 Corinthians, as well as the vision of Dr. King, and offer some words of guidance and reflection.

First of all, would our confirmands stand for a minute --- because I want every one to get a good look at them. Aren’t they the most handsome, the loveliest young people you can imagine? Aren’t we the most blessed church to have this group in our midst? Doesn’t it just about bring tears to your eyes to look at them?

Natalia, Hanna, Jameel, Joe, Ayanna, Victoria, Brandon, and Cate – you represent the Beloved Community Dr. Martin Luther King called us to form. You are the embodiment of Dr. King’s dream. You really are. A church where a girl with a Puerto Rican family, and a boy whose name represents his family’s African ancestry and a girl and a boy with Irish names and another girl whose family came from Jamaica and Britain can all be together - well isn’t that amazing? And isn’t that just a wonderful microcosm of our church, and the kind of community we aspire to be?

I attended a church like Redeemer when I was in seminary – but then it took 20 years for me to be appointed to the kind of church I knew the church was called to be. When I was confirmed as an 8th grader in Berea, there were only a handful of black youth in my school, and not one in my confirmation class. If there were any gay or lesbian members in my church, I didn't know about it. I didn't have any gay or lesbian friends until I went to college, and even then it wasn't anything that was talked about or accepted in the churches I attended at the time. When I was in seminary, Nashville was still flying the confederate flag over the state capital building --- it came down while I was there, under much protest. I say all this to make sure that our confirmands understand that belonging to a church like Redeemer is not anything to take for granted. And that to make our church be more like Dr. King's beloved community, we have to work at it, and we have to treasure what we have. And we have to stand up for it, too. Because it's easier to be a church where most people look and think the same. And believe me, there are plenty of churches you can choose from where that's what you'll find. But that's not what Jesus Christ calls us to. Jesus calls us to love each other, and to accept each other, and to work together to be his body in the world.

At times we may feel forsaken. Becoming a Christian does not make every thing smooth sailing for us. Joining the church does not take away conflict or confusion or crisis in our lives. Israel experienced real forsakenness. Real desolation. I hope our young people's lives are not filled with those things, but mostly I hope that they remember the Lord's promise to them if and when they do experience those things. Which is my hope for all of us. "You shall be called by a new name", Isaiah prophesies. Whatever names others may call us: names that make fun of us, or names that describe something we don't like about ourselves – are not the names God calls us by. Israel was the forsaken nation. But now Israel will be called "My Delight Is in Her". Today, eight of our youth take on the name Christian as well as the name United Methodist as well as the name Redeemerite. Names the rest of us also carry – and names that should make a difference to us when times get rough. We aren't just soloists struggling out there on our own – we are members of a great ensemble, we belong to a community bigger than just ourselves. We are Christians. We are United Methodists. We are members of the Church of the Redeemer. We are part of something special. We are connected and bound together.

And we are gifted by the Holy Spirit for the common good. That's what else I want to say today. There's a point for us to be together --- and it's more than each of us as individuals getting what we need or want from the church. Through our participation we enable others to receive what they need. Through our involvement we help Church of the Redeemer be the church Jesus Christ needs and calls it to be. The whole body is built up when we, as the parts of the body, do our part. And the church is a better church because of it. We may get personal satisfaction or even some recognition from time to time for what we do in the share, but that is not our motivation. Our motivation is to be the common

good. What helps others know the love of Jesus Christ? What helps others hear and believe the good news? What makes it possible for others to know they are forgiven, and welcomed and accepted into the body of Christ? That's our motivation. That's our incentive. To make sure others have the opportunities to receive what we have received. Our gifts – be they physical or spiritual – are gifts that are to be shared so that we as a whole church can be strengthened and nurtured.

The vows of church membership reinforce this idea. I will ask our young people this question: “As members of this congregation will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness?” How each one lives out with their vow will vary from person to person – just as it varies from person to person among all of us here this morning --- but it's a vow we share – and faithful participation is the common denominator. We do not promise to be disinterested bystanders or occasional customers. We promise to be faithful participators – members who take part in and care about the ministries. Next Sunday we will recognize those in our church who finished a term of service in 2009 and dedicate those who will be serving in leadership capacities in 2010. Leadership is one way to participate. But not the only way. It isn't only chair people and members of committees who faithfully participate in our church's ministries. And leadership isn't the only way we need people to participate. Choir. Sunday School. Care giving. ARM. Sisters in Spirit. Bible Study. Mission Trip. Youth Fellowship. Worship liturgists and ushers and acolytes and greeters. Community meal cooks and servers. Prayer chain phone callers. Office volunteer assistants. Landscapers. Repair and fix-it people. And so on. The church is a voluntary organization, but participating in the church is not really negotiable. If you want to be a member, that means participating. It means showing up, sharing your gifts, caring about what goes on, and telling others what it's all about. I hope that today's service is seen as an opportunity for all of us to renew our commitment to participate faithfully in our life together. I hope the confirmation of these eight young people serves as a catalyst, or a jumpstart to our own vow-keeping. How are we doing as members of this community? How faithful have we been in keeping our membership vows? Today is a day to re-commit, if you want. Today is a day to say yes all over again – to Jesus ---to the church --- to each other.

Because it matters. The common good is at stake. Our life together is as good as we make it – by each of us doing our part, by each of us being committed to make this church the best church it can be. A church the Lord delights in. A church gifted by the Holy Spirit. A church living out a dream of unity, a dream of true community. A church bound together in love.

What an incredible day.

What amazing young people. What loving and dedicated parents.

What an inspiring dream,

What an exciting future --- for Joe and Brandon and Natalia and Hanna and Ayanna and Victoria and Cate and Jameel – for us all.

What marvelous grace.

What an awesome God.

What a loving Savior.

What a creative Spirit.

What a delightful and gifted church.

Amen. And Amen. And Amen.