

Sermon Title: Wrought Into Loveliness
Text: Revelation 22:12-21; John 17:20-26
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May 20, 2007
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
Confirmation Sunday

It doesn't quite work to say that this Sunday out of the church year is one of my favorites. That makes it sound something like a flavor of ice cream...something I enjoy, or find pleasing. It might be closer to the mark to say that each year, as we wind our way to the close of our program year, and welcome those young people who have completed their Spiritual Quest into the full membership of the congregation, I am more than a little awed.

The awe changes from year to year. There was a huge shift in my awareness when it was my own daughters who were among those kneeling at the front of the sanctuary. This particular group of young people was toddling when I became a part of the life of this congregation, and I realize that if you all manage to put up with me for much longer, it will be a child I held in my arms at baptism whose head will feel my touch as they bow in confirmation. Our turn to see *The Lion King* has not come up yet, but I know the music well enough, and it is "The Circle of Life" that hums in my mind.

All that, however, is really nostalgia, and nostalgia, while a pleasant indulgence, is not really the stuff by which our souls are nourished. If all this day amounts to is nostalgia, it really is quite unremarkable. One of the challenges of living in a world that is culturally, if not practically Christian is that such markers as this day become precisely that.

When I was a kid, Saturday afternoons were often reserved for "drives", as we'd wind our way along country roads, I think because my dad really wanted to know if he could get himself lost. Driving was different then, I guess, because your travel would be punctuated by small towns laid out between long stretches of farm land, and every now and then in those long stretches of farmland a sign would appear: "Historical Marker Ahead." Our hearts leapt, because it meant we would actually get to stop! Dad never missed a chance to ponder a bit of history. So we'd run and play, dad would frustrate himself by trying to get us to calm down just long enough to read the important looking marker about the first dairy farm in southeastern Wisconsin, or the site of some meeting between the native tribes and the European settlers. And then it would be back into the car, and off down the road.

I worry that "confirmation" is something like one of those historical markers: a chance to get out, stretch our legs, but something that, most likely, is forgotten by the time the next small town appears on the horizon. Is it merely a rite of passage, "graduation" from church? Or is there something more important that we are saying about ourselves, our God, and the life we are called to live in this world?

You know we have been poking around a bit in the book of Revelation these past weeks, and this Sunday is our last little dip into this odd and complex text. You know that I've been trying hard to convince you that John was less concerned with talking about the end of the world than he was interested in the beginning of faith. It is interpretations of the visions that really took hold at the beginning of the last century that have so influenced the popular reading of the text. And so it is no surprise to me that as we read the final verses I am captivated less by the potential

of catastrophic judgment, and more by a double, maybe even triple invitation. It's a call and response, really. "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

First a quick note on the images. Who's doing the inviting here? "The Spirit and the Bride." It would take more time than we've got for me to lay out the reasoning, but I hope you'll take my word that in the last turn of Revelation, it is no longer Almighty God, seated on the throne, or the Lamb who calls out to us, but the *church*...the "Bride of Christ" who extends this invitation. Not to conformity, or obedience, not to a yes or no, up or down vote, but to this marvelous river of life that now flows, not at the boundaries of our existence, but right through the center of our living faith. It's not hard to hear an invitation to baptism in these words...the second century church calling out to all who would hear to find their welcome in the Lord; to humble themselves, and gather, at that time literally by the river, to share in Christ's dying, that we might also be joined in his rising.

It is the call that was issued for each of these confirmands, and for each of us, for most of us in our infancy, but for some as youth and even adults. Come, find your place within the community of God's redeemed. Splash in the waters of life. Be nurtured, and cared for, and renewed. And we did, and we were. But that's only the first call. There is yet more, and then, there remains the *response*.

Realize that at its origins, the rite we mark today was a middle step in a single act of the church: the newly baptized person was taken directly from the font to the center of the church, where with the oil of anointing, the people proclaimed the *Spirit's* confirmation of what had just been done with water. It's not that the believer *confirmed* the promise of God, but that God restated the powerful promise conveyed in the passage through the waters of baptism. And all of this was preparation for the next immediate step, as all believers would join together at the table, to celebrate the Lord's Supper. The *confirmation* that matters is not ours, but *God's*.

Perhaps the most important implication of that, for those who are joined to us today, but really for all of us wherever we might be on our own faith journey, is that we are not, with any act we can muster or manage, working our own way toward salvation. There is no word we can utter, no good act we can undertake, which of itself would merit our place in God's gracious hand. We are not loved because we are lovely. We are lovely because we are loved.

And it is from that pure, simple fact—that we are loved and redeemed by God—that our own voices pick up the chant: "Let everyone who hears, say 'Come!'" Our song gets caught up into that glorious resonance of God's creating power, and rings through creation: "Let everyone who is thirsty come..." none of it properly our response, but only God's affirming word echoing through our lives, and in to the world.

Now I need to be clear, that does not mean our actions do not matter. *Our* response rests in those closing words of the New Testament as it finally fell out: "Amen. Come Lord Jesus!" The grace of the Lord Jesus be with us all...Amen.

Amen. That's the word! And no, it does not mean, "glad that's over, can we go home now?" It means, "let it be so in my life!" It is summed up in the last words of the prayer which forms our Gospel lesson for this morning, that "the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." What we are really saying—so finally we get to our response to *God's* call—is "let our lives reflect the love that made us, saved us, and sustains us by the grace of God."

On Wednesday night, these confirmands met with the session to be received into the membership of the church, and that involved something of a conversation, between the elders, the confirmands, and the covenant partners who have shared the journey of the past months with them. One of the questions they were asked to talk about is "what is the most important thing that the church does?" It was to me the surest sign that they were really ready to take on the mantle of membership that their answers focused on the many ways in which we, as a congregation, can reach out into the world around us to share God's love with those in need. But it was Richard Dodge who really provided the key to it all. He noted the many experiences his own children have had on work trips, and our own shared journey to Louisiana last Spring. You go, he said, thinking you're going to help someone—make a difference in the world. But what you realize in the midst of it that really what you are doing is growing your *own* faith along the way.

We're not adding stars to your crown, or making deposits in a salvation savings account. We just walking together in the road God has given us, and perhaps the most amazing thing about it all is that its as we allow ourselves to be God's hands and feet in this world, we truly are grafted to the body, and become one with each other, and with the God who calls us.

So to you good folk of this congregation, who fourteen, fifteen years ago, joined your voices in a promise to share your faith's journeys with these young people, congratulations! They have made it to the point that today, they do not walk behind us, but beside us in fulfilling God's call. To you, confirmands, congratulations, not because you have finished the race, but because you have made it to the starting line! You've heard the call, and come to drink of the rivers of the water of life. Together, then, let us join in sharing that rich wealth, that the love of God, with which *we* have been loved, might be in us, and we might bear Christ into our world.

Let us pray.