

John 13:33-35 ~ Acts 11:1-18
The Spirit Told me to Go with Them
 4th Sunday of Easter ~ Confirmation Sunday ~ May 15, 2022
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Introduction

You heard it straight from Jesus' lips: "Love one another as I have loved you." In the first scripture lesson that Owen just read, Jesus issued this new commandment to the eleven disciples still at their last supper table together. It occurs immediately *after* Judas had left the table to go betray him and right *before* Jesus would tell Peter that he would deny him three times before the rooster crowed the very next morning. Yes: Peter, his eager beaver disciple who sits-in-the-front-of-the-classroom with his laptop closed and his phone off. That same Peter would soon deny even knowing Jesus. And all the rest would abandon him. That tells you something about the way Jesus loves us right there. And something about the way we are supposed to love others.

Surprisingly it is John who simplifies his entire gospel, into one, short commandment. You may recall that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus responds to a favorite rabbinic question, "Tell us Rabbi, which is the greatest commandment?" with not one, but two commandments. (See Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28.) But in John it's condensed into one great commandment, right here in 13:34: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." That's it friends, end of sermon... Well, not quite.

Every year this text is read on the night of Maundy Thursday during Holy Week. But today we are hearing it in the bright light of the 5th Sunday of Easter. In this light, we can see it more clearly as the core of our resurrection ethic. And here at FPC, on Confirmation Sunday, this text and our second lesson in Acts will help us to consider what Owen and Antonio are really about to say "yes" to as they profess their faith in Christ publicly, for the first time. *And* what they and we must say "no" to, as Christ followers. Both are contained in this one commandment.

Acts 11 is brutally honest. It opens up for us one of the biggest challenges embedded in Jesus' love commandment. We will see in this story how the Holy Spirit pushed Peter and his community that day; and how it still pushes us today. Wherever we are on our spiritual journeys, to go deeper and wider than we'd like to, when it comes to this business of loving others. Peter is still in the seaport city of Joppa, where we were last week in Acts 10, when he raised Tabitha from her deathbed saying, "Tabitha, get up!" Today it's the Holy Spirit in a dream telling Peter the exact same thing, "Get up, Peter!" Remember that "get up" is the English translation of the Greek verb (*anastas*) the word that means to be resurrected. AKA code for: something utterly unexpected, disorienting, inexplicable, *and* God-infused is about to happen to you.

Let us open our ears and our hearts for what the Spirit needs to wake us up to, in this reading of Acts 11:1-18.

Sermon

"Confirmation bias." Have you heard of it? Yes, we *are* biased when it comes to our two amazing confirmands, Owen and Antonio. And we are biased toward *every* class of confirmands that we are privileged to teach and confirm each year. However, that's not what "Confirmation bias" really means to the general population. In short, "confirmation bias" actually refers to our human tendency to search only for evidence that confirms our preferred beliefs. In other words, we don't see things as they are; we see things as *WE ARE*. We see the things we want to see that confirm our assumptions and our preferred way of looking at the world. And we ignore or dismiss or demean the things that don't. "Confirmation bias" comes up a lot these days as we seek to understand the deepening divides between people who see the world so differently.

Although this may seem like a 21st century buzz word, thirteenth century scholastics like John Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas were buzzing about it 900 years ago. In fact, Richard Rohr tells the story of the Latin phrase he was made to memorize during his Catholic seminary days: "*Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur.*" It means, "Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver." In other words, we all have filters. When something new comes along, our brains (without our conscious awareness) make incredibly quick decisions as they evaluate incoming information or ideas. Ideas that fit in are easy and convenient to accept, and they give us pleasure because they confirm what we already think. If they don't, we will reject them.

Our brains do this, not to be ignorant, but to be efficient. It helps us to make decisions quickly as we navigate our complex and confusing world. Ideas that don't fit easily require us to think, and rethink, perhaps long-held assumptions. This kind of thinking is hard work. And it can be painful. Who has time or energy for that? So, our brain presses a "reject" or "delete" button when a new idea presents itself. "I'll stick with my current frame, thank you very much," it says. And it gives me a little jolt of pleasure to reward me for my efficiency.ⁱ We prefer stories that confirm what we already hold to be true. And then along came Jesus who taught us, commanded us, to think and to do otherwise. To love as Jesus loves calls us to keep growing into people who see others, see the world as Jesus does. Not as we do. Not as *WE ARE*.

According to social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, "Even before the advent of social media, search engines were supercharging confirmation bias, making it far easier for people to find evidence for absurd beliefs and conspiracy theories, such as that the Earth is flat and that the U.S. government staged the 9/11 attacks. And I will add tragically this morning, after the mass shooting in Buffalo, New York: the white supremacist belief known as "replacement theory." Truly confirmation bias can kill body and soul. And just did yesterday in broad daylight while people were out grocery shopping on a Saturday afternoon. As Jonathan Haidt goes onto say: "But social media made things worse..." In this article he suggests that the most reliable cure for confirmation bias is interaction with people who don't share your beliefs.ⁱⁱ Yes, this is true.

Here's what I believe to be true for us as Christ followers: Jesus gave us the command that can cure us of confirmation bias. It won't happen overnight. We can see it in the gospels and in Acts, it is a slow process that takes a community. In our Acts 11 story, we can see the LOVE command as cure for confirmation bias, put into practice. Without the help of social media, the news had already gone viral: Peter had just baptized a slew of *gentiles*. "That Peter always did seem a little crazy, but this? How could he even touch those people, much less baptize and welcome them in like they were part of us? We have got to draw the line somewhere." I will remind you what the term "gentile" meant to them. For Jews (and, yes, Jesus was a Jew) everyone in the world could be defined by one of two categories: Jew or gentile. It was a simple binary in which "gentile" meant simply "not a Jew." For any Jewish person, gentiles were "them." Not us: the unwashed, impure, unchosen, outsiders.

That's why they were so offended and outraged. "How could you do this, Peter?" Surprisingly "fly off the handle" Peter didn't lash back defensively here. He explained to them, "step-by-step" exactly why he did this utterly inexplicable, disorienting, discomforting thing: "The Spirit told me to go with *them* and not to make a distinction between them and us." Peter followed the "get up" resurrection ethic of Jesus' new commandment, throwing off his brain's internal "confirmation bias." Wait, what? It threw everyone off. But they listened to Peter's story, then they were silenced, and then in that moment they were cured of their "confirmation bias" "Then, God has given even to the Gentiles, the repentance that leads to life."

It was an eye-opening inflection point for the early Christian church. Did Jesus really mean what he said about Loving one another as I have loved you? Notice our job here is to love back the way we have been loved. And to do that we are called to fight against our fear of the other, the different, to say "no" to that fear, and to say "yes" to the Spirit that grows us, us, day by day, step by step, to love others, to love "the other" as Jesus loves them and us. We do this better together.

So, you may be asking, if the Spirit is calling us to practice radical inclusivity, where there is no distinction between them and us, where do we draw the line? "If you stand for nothing, Burr, what will you fall for?" says Alexander Hamilton to Aaron Burr in the Broadway hit musical, *Hamilton*. We learn from Jesus and today from Peter: **we stand for love**. Loving others, all others, as Jesus loves us. It takes more than a lifetime to get that right. And it takes a community, listening and learning, guided by the Spirit. A community that says "no" to hate. "No" to hate crimes and hate speech. We say "no" to white supremacy. And we say "no" to the supremacy of *any* group over another. To do that, we must be a community that fights against the impulse toward confirmation bias. And *instead* commits to practicing empathic ways of listening and self-searching dialogue that leads to mutual understanding.ⁱⁱⁱ That's what we are confirming Owen and Antonio into today.

We are getting ready to welcome refugees and help them resettle in Marshfield. Barb Gillespie will tell you more about this project in our Minute for Mission. In a minute 😊. What I want to share right now, is how I believe the Holy Spirit led me to "get up" and start mobilizing our community to "do love" for those forced to flee from their home country for their lives. No

matter where they are from, or how different from us they may be. When I heard about the thousands of Afghan evacuees temporarily housed at Fort McCoy, only 67 miles from here, I heard the Spirit calling my name, calling our name. Telling us to go, to get up and see if we can offer these children of God a place to land, to find welcome, to make a new home. And what started with about five clergy, has expanded to over fifty community leaders and concerned citizens from multiple faith traditions, united in this project. It will not be easy or smooth or comfortable. But when the Spirit tells us to go, we get up and go.

Owen and Antonio, we welcome you to this church where together we go and grow into the love of Christ Jesus. Wherever that may take us.

ⁱ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/confirmation-bias-2021-03-02/>

ⁱⁱ Jonathan Haidt, "After Babel: How Social Media Dissolved the Mortar of Society and Made America Stupid," (Atlantic, May 2022), p.60-61.

ⁱⁱⁱ William P. Brown, *Deep Calls to Deep, The Psalms in Dialogue and Disruption*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2021), pp.10-11.