

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
 East Moline, Illinois  
 Pastor Becky Sherwood  
**May 22nd, 2022, The Sixth Sunday of Easter**  
**CONFIRMATION SUNDAY**  
*(Anna Barrigah, Maddie Curry, Eunice Dogbe)*  
 Jeremiah 29:11-14a, John 15:1, 4-17 (The Message Translation)

Each year when confirmation begins, one of the very first things we do, at the very first meeting, is spend time with the reading from John 15 you just heard. So, way back in September of 2019, in that land before time where the word Covid wasn't even in our vocabulary, Eunice, Maddie and Anna, did just that.

The members of the longest lasting Confirmation Class in FPCEM history, ate lunch together prepared by one of their families, spent some time talking together in the Youth Room and then they took the reading from John 15 outside and they looked at trees and the branches that were connected to them.

They picked one tree, and one branch on that tree, and followed that one branch with their eyes, from the place it connected to the trunk, all the way out to the very end of the branch.

Then they journaled about that connection and the ways that they felt connected to Jesus, and the ways they felt disconnected from Jesus.

They journaled about what it felt like to think about Jesus being their friend.

Then they wrote a prayer using the things they'd journaled about.

Then like all the confirmation classes before them, they began a nine-month journey exploring the life of faith.

But then, unlike any other class before them, over the next 2.5 years they met in person, stopped for a while after March 2020 as we all figured out how to set up Zoom accounts and unmute and live in the virtual world,

then they met online,

and finally in person again once their pastor recovered enough from long Covid, which has brought them to today

when they will name for themselves their desire to be followers of Jesus Christ.

The reason I begin each confirmation class with John 15 is I think it gives us a wonderful picture of the life of faith. In the journey of faith, we spend a lifetime learning what it means to be connected to Jesus Christ. It's good to start thinking about our connection to Jesus at the very beginning.

Many of us are not familiar with the grape vines and branches that Jesus was writing about in John 15. But here in the Midwest, surrounded by two rivers we know a lot about trees and branches. So, I think we can let ourselves hear Jesus say, I am the tree and you are the branches, and God is the Farmer growing the trees.

We gather week by week in this Sanctuary because we are followers of Jesus who says to us branches: "Live in me. Make your home in me, just as I do in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the tree, neither can you unless you abide in me. Make yourself at home in my love. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you."

We are branches connected to the tree of life that is Christ. You bring your children, and grandchildren, and neighbor children to church here, because you want them to grow in that same love you know in Christ. You want them to learn how to abide in Jesus' love.

And you yourself come to church because of your connection to Jesus, to the other branches around you, because your faith is fed here, and you learn to abide in Jesus' love.

The joy of Confirmation Sunday is that it is the day that our young people say with their own voices "yes, I also want to be a follower of Jesus." When these three young women were baptized their parents, out of their own connections to Christ, made vows of faith for their children. They said: "yes, Jesus is my Lord and Savior and I will teach my child to follow him."

This morning their children, now young women, will take the next step on their own and will make their own vows of faith from their own hearts, with their own voices.

Today we celebrate three of the branches of this church you have watched grow since they were young. You've helped them learn what it means to abide in Jesus' love by being with them in the church nursery, you've listened to them and hugged them in the hallways, you've listened to them during coffee hour, and bought a lot of Girl Scout cookies and school sales trinkets and wrapping paper and candy, you've watched them grow during the Children's Sermons and Church Talents Shows, and Christmas Pageants, and some of you have had the amazing privilege of spending more time with them as you've taught them in Sunday School, at VBS and at Youth Group.

In choosing to give your time that way you've gotten to know their inquisitiveness, their senses of humor, their creativity, the things that make them the amazing, quirky, joyful young women that they are.

This is a day to celebrate these three branches that have been nurtured in Jesus' love and the encircling care of this congregation. In John 15 I believe Jesus is calling to the Confirmands and to us as a church family with a strong call. Jesus says to them and to us: "Live in me. Make your home in me, just as I do in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the branch, neither can you unless you abide in me. Make yourself at home in my love."

First to the Confirmands, soon to be Adult Members, of this church. I challenge you to keep learning for yourselves what it means to make your home in Jesus. I know the three of you to be amazing thinkers and questioners and seekers. I've always loved that about you! Keep up that good work of exploring the life of faith. You HAVE NOT arrived at the end of the journey of faith today, this is one point on a life-long journey.

Please stay connected to us, and to other trees of faith you will meet along the way.

Please keep looking at actual trees and branches and thinking about, and feeling, how you are connected to Jesus. Learn for yourselves what it means to make your home in Jesus. Ask Jesus to help you with that, he will love hearing from you.

And maybe every once in a while, at the end of the day, grab your Koosh ball, and ask yourself what were the high points, low points and where did I see God today? I know how much you love that!

Because what I've never told you is that this is another way of praying and spending time making your home with Jesus!

Now for us as a church family, I've been thinking about what it means that we are branches connected to Christ. As Jesus says to us: "Live in me. Make your home in me, just as I do in you," I think there are two challenges for us as adults of the church. The first is the same challenge I

gave to the confirmands. In the journey of faith, we are called to always be exploring what it means to be making our home in Jesus's love. It is a journey that takes a life time; we will never outgrow it.

Which leads to the second part of this challenge. Jesus is the tree and we are the branches. And we are branches who are called to work together for the young branches we are raising in our midst. The children who come up for the children sermon each week, the little ones in their parent's and grandparent's arms have been entrusted to us in the community of faith. We make vows when they are baptized to raise them in the faith.

How are we as a church family helping them learn how to make their home in Jesus' love? Because that isn't just the responsibility of their families, or the Christian Education committee.

It is the gift and responsibility of all of us in the family of faith.

So, my challenge to all of you adults today: Do you know all our children and youth by name? Do you greet them by name in the hallways and in the sanctuary? We are a small enough church and I know how brilliant you are, I know you can do this!

(Or do they just know you because you look at them when they get up during worship, or tell them to stop running in the hallway after church—which isn't necessarily a bad thing.)

One of the ways our children and youth learn they have value to God is by learning they have value to you, the people with whom they worship God. And they know they have value to know when they hear you call them by name and ask how they are doing, and then take the time to listen. I always think of Helen Stone, at 99, coming in off the church bus, leaning on her walker and listening to our children in the hallway before church. It was a picture of the church being a sheltering tree to our children.

And a small commercial message. If you are physically able when the Vacation Bible School sign up sheets come out in the June Newsletter, please consider how you will spend time with our children for a Saturday-Sunday VBS July 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>.

This is a day to celebrate the good news that the God of love is an amazing Gardener, who loved us so much that God sent Jesus to love us, to live and die and raise to new life for us, so that we could always live in that love. In John 15 Jesus has given us a wonderful picture of this love and invites us into that love so that we can grow.

We are branches in the sheltering tree of Love. As Maddie, Anna and Eunice say yes to being followers of Jesus, let us say yes again too and let us celebrate together the love we have been given, as we make our home inside that abundant love.