

**A Tapestry of Faith and Love**  
**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Britta Augdahl**

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Some questions are easier to answer than others. Do you like dogs? So easy. YES. What's your favorite cereal? Ah, a little harder, but still pretty easy peasy, Cinnamon Toast Crunch! What is Confirmation? Hmm. That's more of a stumper. Confirmation, what does that even really mean? We try to address this question with our youth head on in early spring each year as we start to gear up for this day, and truly challenge our 8th graders to consider the many things it encompasses. We even invite the pastors to come chat with them, and really try to give them things to chew on while they ponder their decision to be confirmed. So, today, we're going to think about that word a little bit more together...

In times as uncertain and trying as these, confirmation that anything will be certain seems like a bit of a pipe dream. We have really felt the loss, grief, doubt and fear in our bones this year. And for our youth, navigating school and distance learning during a pandemic has been nothing short of an exhausting rollercoaster on a loop. This year has felt like a long nightmare of racially targeted violence and denial of human rights, yet it has been our reality. Where has God been all this time?

I know that when I was in 10th grade and anticipating my own Confirmation, I had way more questions than answers. I could confirm then, that I was deeply confused about the hate and heartache I saw in the world, and I can still confirm now that some days feel like that hasn't changed at all.

What gives me some comfort, though, is imagining that the folks in Jesus' time sometimes felt this same way too. In fact, we know so! Jesus was no stranger to questions about the world. Actually, his thing was to answer the questions asked of him with more questions! He was all about the questions. I'm sure some people found that to be extremely frustrating, "Like come on, the whole reason I asked you in the first place was to get an answer!"

But, I think there is a lot of wisdom in Jesus' approach. Answering a question with a question creates a space for listening and for dialogue.

By questioning people's questions, Jesus encouraged others to think critically about the oppressive and harmful structures they saw around them, of empire, of greed, and of discrimination. In order to get others on his wavelength, he had to catch people off guard and make them think. In inviting those he encountered into dialogue, Jesus encouraged collaboration in the building of the community, the Kin-dom, that he came to model.

He created and inspired community in the ways that he used tools like empathy and listening, to make people feel welcome, seen, heard and loved. This community of Jesus followers wasn't perfect, of course, and it was a community full of questions. But, it was also a community of faith and dedication.

There is a lot to say about the humanity, and the messiness of this kind of community. It's real. It wasn't all about answers, perfection and certainty.

It didn't exclude the tough stuff, the confusing stuff, the heartbreaking stuff. The stuff we seem to witness, grieve and bear on the daily now, it seems.

Feeling sick in body, mind, and heart, are experiences we have all felt the weight of in some way throughout this pandemic ridden year. Yet, there were bonds of strength, togetherness, and faith that held us together.

The Confirmation banner we created this year with our Confirmands is really unique. As you can probably tell, it's a quilt, and a really meaningful, artistic representation of this year. It's a coming together of many individual experiences, painted, drawn, glued or sewn, a big and beautiful cloak of community. A reminder that though we might have felt far away from one another this year, we found new and creative ways to be church together.

We are each a piece of a bigger whole in which we can find love and support. A tapestry of faith and love, a little messy and sticky, and full of knots and twists if you look really close. But it's creatively poured into with emotion, and all in all, a gorgeous work of art inspired by our shared vulnerability as humans, and our unique human experiences of this past year, of hope and sorrow intertwined.

Last year when we had to make our Confirmation Sunday worship purely a virtual ordeal due to COVID, we really thought it would be the last time celebrating over a screen. Yet, we stand here again today, missing our awesome youth and their families standing out there in the pews.

Our Confirmands this year – Matthew, Tatum, Hannah, Jackie and Madeleine – have had their unfair share of the tough stuff. However, they have continued to show up, and to be in community in whatever ways they can, all the while modeling love, dedication and compassion. They are all very special people whom I feel I have a deep privilege to know.

This year, they have continued to show up for Confirmation Zooms on Wednesday nights, Sunday morning faith formation Zooms, virtual game nights & movie nights, outdoor fellowship events, and fundraising events. And that's not even the half of it! They have also shown up for their siblings, their friends, their families, classmates, teachers, teammates and coaches, for dance, ice-skating, swimming, volleyball, and golf... as well as their broader community. They have really embodied what it means to be branches of God's vine, as our scripture says, and to abide in God and in community, and bear fruit, even in a year that has felt otherwise pretty barren.

At the end of March, our youth group had the privilege of spending some time on Zoom in learning and discussion with Jeanelle Austin, a caretaker for the George Floyd Square and memorial. A few things really stuck with me from listening to her share her experiences with us. Jeanelle made it very clear that she believes the answer to eradicating racism is community.

Intentional community, where one can experience human dignity and feel support from people who are committed to empathizing with both your joys and struggles. A place where grief and sorrow are allowed and the complexity of humanity is fully embraced.

A community that one contributes to like Jesus did by having tough conversations, but entering those conversations with the posture of listening, to ask questions that affirm the humanity of the other, to step out and be present with other people. To learn through embodiment. As Jeanelle so beautifully put it, "Justice should be the muscle memory that our bodies resort to." That is the power of real, intentional community, like the one we have created here at Oak Grove, and the one we seek to create in our neighborhoods, our country, and in our world.

So, I can confirm that our five Confirmands are joining a really special, welcoming, loving and justice-driven community. But what is Confirmation? I don't really think we even answered that, did we? Well, I like to lean on Pastor Mary's wisdom for this one, because I haven't been to seminary, yet.

Confirmation is really just a big YES to a bunch of really joyful and important things, as I mentioned before during our children's time. It's a "yes" to showing God's love in the world. A "yes" to turning from hurtful ways, and turning toward God's loving ways of peace, justice and mercy. It's a "yes" to being present and active in the church. A "yes" to learning to love and follow Jesus as a life-long process. It's a "yes" to leaning into an opportunity for closer walk with God, surrounded by people who will support you through it.

It's a "yes" to committing oneself to deep and intentional community where questions can be asked, and listening has room to be planted and to grow. It's a "yes" to receiving help along the way, and to be there for others when they need help too. And, as Pastor Anne wisely told our Confirmands on Tuesday night as they were Confirmed at our Session meeting, it's saying "yes" to continuing on a journey that embraces the mystery of God, alongside a group of people who are all still just trying to figure it out.

So, gosh are we lucky to welcome these amazing humans Matthew, Tatum, Hannah, Jackie and Madeleine into Oak Grove membership, and to have them along with us on this journey. They have so much to teach us, and I know that they will continue to show up in love in big ways here at church, and in the world.

Let us all say "yes" each and every day to the call to follow Jesus, and to love God and one another. We are indeed the branches, creating a

tapestry of messy faith and love, all held by one another, and by our loving Creator. Amen.