

# **“The Involuntary Club”**

**Acts 10:44-48; I John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17**

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May 9, 2021

From the Pulpit

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Sermon delivered The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 6, May 9, 2021, dedicated to Lila Grace Bendick on her baptismal day; Blair Andrews, Emily Cline, and Allison Dellinger our 2021 Schumacher Award recipients; to my mother Carol Lorene Kellermeyer Ahrens who was born on Mother's Day 1928; to Adrienne Hood and her son Henry Green V; to all the mothers anywhere in this world who have become members of any Involuntary Club and always to the glory of God!

## “The Involuntary Club”

Acts 10:44-48; I John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The first “Involuntary Club” in Christian history could have been called The Jesus Club. At the Last Supper, Jesus offers these words to his closest disciples: *“It was not you who chose me, but I chose you.”* Calmly and clearly, Jesus Christ establishes the membership requirements for this club. To be in the Jesus club, this newly forming club established in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, circa AD33, the rules were simple: **Friendship, Fruit bearing, and**

**Love – FFL!** You must be friends, not servants; you must be fruit bearers, not judgement declarers; and you must be lovers, not haters.

We have had this backwards all these years. Haven't we? We forgot that Jesus saw his disciples first – from a distance. He knew who he was choosing before they even knew he existed. He spotted them. He recruited them. He called them. He chose them.

They were drawn in by his immense love. And so are we. We all think we are making this choice. We have always seen ourselves as those who joined The Jesus Club. We like to believe that we are in control of everything. We like to believe this is our choice. But that is a myth of our creating. That is a design of God's creating. It is clear that, like the disciples before us, we are the ones chosen by him. We live, and move, and serve, and have our being and are called to be Christians by God's initiative. The First Letter of John underlines this by saying, *“Everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God.”*

As the Recruitment Secretary of the First Involuntary Club, Peter was known to often lose track of the FFL requirements for the club. He and the other charter members of the club concluded that since Jesus was a Jewish Messiah, all The Jesus Club members would conform to the regulations that defined their faith tradition.

The worst sore points centered on dietary rules and circumcision. Were they essential to be a follower of Jesus? The church in Jerusalem thought the answer was “yes.” But Paul, the apostle to

the Gentiles (and by the way not a charter member of The Jesus Club) was convinced the answer was “no.”

So how would the Club resolve this problem? God took care of this.

Scripture shows us that God often deals with faith dilemmas through dreams. (Think of Jacob and Joseph and now Peter.) One day Peter had a dream in which a luscious banquet of forbidden foods was lowered in front of him, and a voice invited him to help himself. He thought it was a nightmare. He scrupulously refused, insisting that his faith was stronger than his appetite. The voice repeated itself twice – repeated the invitation and finally rebuked Peter saying, *“What God has made clean, you can not to call profane!”*

Talk about putting the brakes on any notions Peter and friends may have had about making their own rules...

Peter was still scratching his head about the dream when an envoy from Cornelius, a generous Gentile centurion, arrived to invite him for a visit. Peter knew quite well that fraternizing with a centurion, a Gentile and especially this guy Cornelius transgressed all the laws, but his crazy dream urged him to move on. Cornelius told Peter about a similar dream experience. That God had shown him that Peter was the one to bring him to baptism. As they share their dreams, it becomes clear that God’s plan all along has been to set these two guys up on a blind date.

As Peter speaks about Jesus, Cornelius and his household were filled with the Holy Spirit. They are hearing the best news in the world! Seeing that, Peter makes the unloosing proclamation we

hear in today's reading: *“God shows no partiality. ... Whoever fears God and acts uprightly is acceptable to God.”*

Having admitted that God's Spirit cannot be bound by human rules, Peter baptizes the Gentiles on the spot. He has just placed himself on the “unacceptable list” for the Jerusalem contingent of The Jesus Club. He can't worry about whether or not they knew or would follow the Jewish laws. He finally realizes that God has chosen them and accepted them just as they are.

**Drop the mike, Pedro! You finally “got” your founder's purpose!**

Knowing that God would not always intervene with dreams, the community had to rethink their sense of what determined who belongs to the community and who does not belong to the community. That's where the Gospel of John and the first letter of John come together. Both point to Friendship, Fruit bearing and Love (FFL) as the only measuring stick for belonging to the company of Jesus' disciples.

We all belong to the First Involuntary Club in Christian history. Lila just joined our club this morning and along with the other seven members of the Super Eight, (including Elias whom you met earlier today), she will be anointed into the club next Sunday morning. We call it Confirmation, but it really is agreeing to be friends, to be fruit bearers and to be lovers (FFL) of all God's Children.

Here we have the essential criteria for discipleship. Peter realized that he had been chosen and he recognized that the same was true of Cornelius and his household. Like the people of Israel of old, **GOD HAD CHOSEN THEM ALL.** And they all learned

that the only point of being chosen was to spread the love they had received. (Drawn from Mary M. McGlone's reflection for the 6th Sunday of Easter, "Who Belongs?" in the *National Catholic Reporter*, April 30-May 13, 2021.)

***"God shows no partiality."*** That is a creedal statement of The Jesus Club.

The first involuntary club, however, was not the last Involuntary Club. It's not the only Involuntary Club.

In the March 2021 issue of Columbus Monthly magazine, my friend Minister Adrienne Hood was one of ten leaders on racial justice featured for her leadership in our community. The article began:

*"The Moms showed up shortly after it happened. They told her what it would be like now. How the police investigation would unfold. What the media would say. The way the prosecutor would seem so kind in the beginning. She wrote some of it down. It turned into a reliable checklist. Never mind that there was only one Henry Green V, only one Bub, only one funny kid with the wide grin and gentle eyes, only one 23-year-old son shot seven times on June 6, 2016 on the streets of South Linden, only one mom left to sit in the quiet agony that followed."*

*Adrienne Hood's story was hers, but it wasn't unique. It played out almost exactly as other mothers had predicted. She joined the club the moment a bullet hit her Bub in the chest. The 'Involuntary club,' she calls it."* ("Adrienne Hood," by Lori Kurtzman, Columbus Monthly, March, 2021, pp. 30-32.)

During Lent, Adrienne shared her story about The Involuntary Club with our Monday night Lenten Group. Everyone who was there that night was deeply moved by her testimony. We were

drawn into her faith which grew out of this terrible killing five years ago. Since then, 26 other Columbus area mothers have become members of the Involuntary Club as their sons and daughters have been shot and killed by law enforcement in our city and on our streets.

Adrienne Hood has become a champion for Columbus as she has led us all in a righteous action for bending the moral arc of the universe, and challenging and changing the system which allows police violence in our city. Representing all the moms, Adrienne will share her testimony Tuesday night as we gather virtually or as we go in cars to First Church of God for the 2021 Nehemiah Action.

Adrienne Hood is not alone this Mother's Day. Other mothers are members of other Involuntary Clubs. There are mothers whose children have been gunned down in homicides in our city which have doubled in the past year – having grown by 60% over the year before that. None of them will have their children by their side today.

There is The Involuntary Club of mothers who have had their children taken away from them at the border between Mexico and the US. There is The Involuntary Club of mothers who are victims of domestic abuse and hiding with their children to save all of their lives. There is The Involuntary Club of women who have been robbed of life and hope as they are sex trafficked at all ages. There is The Involuntary Club of mothers whose children are on the autism spectrum, have Cerebral Palsy, Downs Syndrome, childhood cancers, cardiovascular disorders, congenital abnormalities and genetic disorders, behavioral

challenges and other disorders – all of them facing challenges in clubs they would rather not be apart of.

You can find the mothers of these Involuntary Clubs rocking their babies in the NICU at Nationwide Children’s Hospital. You can find them as well lying down on the beds next to their little ones at Nationwide Children’s Hospital as their babies face surgeries they never imagined they would have. You see them sitting up late at night at home wondering where they will find the strength to face one more day as their baby rocks in their arms or their child sleeps a few feet away. All of these are involuntary clubs to which women “belong” are not wished for or wanted by anyone. No one wants to be a member of these clubs.

Today, we welcome three more young women to the membership of an Involuntary Club we have formed and have been hosting at First Church for 75 years on Mother’s Day. It is called the Frederick W. Schumacher Awards. This year, Blair Andrews, Emily Cline and Allison Dellinger have all joined the Schumacher Involuntary Club – with now well over 200 young women through the decades.

Blair, Emily, and Allison did not choose to have hardship, or death, or accidents, or multiple challenges afflict their families. They have set themselves apart – according to teachers, counselors and those who know them through Sports, Young Life and church – as young women who have risen while fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers have fallen, have been stricken, or have died. While their family members were knocked down, these three daughters and sisters rose to the occasion – not one of them seeking to be heroes. All of them doing the heroic work – the heroic work of daily love, compassion, and care. Not only

that, Blair, Emily and Allison – each in their own ways – extended their love and compassion to others beyond their immediate family. They truly follow the three principal characteristics established by Jesus (FFL) – Friendship, Fruit-bearing, Love.

Allison's nominator says of her, "When I think of Allison, I think of an angel on earth." Blair's nominator wrote, "the love that Blair has for God and her dedication to serving others takes root first and foremost to her family and then spreads out from there." And of Emily it was written, "Emily is one of the bubbliest, joy-filled compassionate Christian young ladies I have ever had the chance to meet." Each young woman took the challenges she faced and through the power and conviction of her faith made a huge difference in her family and our community.

Adrienne (as a mother) and Blair, Allison, Emily (as young women of faith) and so many others have become members of Involuntary Clubs – women and men. They have taken what has been given them and transformed it for Good. Thanks be to God!

I have seen this with so many women through my life. Whether they were moms or not, they have been members of clubs they didn't want to be a part of and wished that no one else had been part of. Even when there appeared to be "NO WAY" – they found a way to make a difference in the face of ugliness and indifference. They rose against all odds.

James 1:2-3 says is best, *"My friends, consider it a sheer gift, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way."* (James 1:2-3, The Message.)

I pray for each one of you today as you are part of some Involuntary Club – at least the Jesus Club – a rather distinctive involuntary club I might add, into which we have all been called. Now that he chose you, may you choose to spread God’s love without distinction and without any partiality to anyone. Amen.