

“Belonging in Covenantal Love”

B, Easter 7; John 17:6-19

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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I. HOW DO WE BELONG?

“I am my Beloved’s and He is mine....

His banner over me is love...”

“If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. “ (Romans 14:8)

“But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world. (1 John 4)

What does it mean to *belong*? To be part of something? To belong to a family, a church, a community? To belong to God – beloved children of the Holy One?

Jesus is telling God the Mother and Father that “these ones belong to me, but they are yours too, because you gave them to me in the first place! I am yours and they are yours and they are now mine and they are yours. Let’s take care of them together!

Mother Teresa says: “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

I don’t often quote Rick Warren, mega-church pastor who tends to make things a little too simple or black and white in my book, but a phrase of his caught my eye:

“You are called to belong, not just believe.”

Bingo! If we’re exploring what it means to belong, to be part of the Body of Christ, to join in covenant with one another, I think that’s right on. We don’t have a list of “Do you believe this” rules or dogmas to ask new folks in our midst to sign-on to. We have an Affirmation of Faith and belonging that we all proclaim together.

“We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we *testify*:

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.”

“We affirm our beliefs together, testify to God’s creation of us and calling us together in God’s image – that’s our declaration – that we are called to belong to one another in love.

Rick Warren continues:

“We are created for community, fashioned for fellowship, and formed for a family, and none of us can fulfill God’s purposes by ourselves.

The Bible says we are put together, joined together, built together, members together, heirs together, fitted together, and held together. You’re not on your own anymore!

II. YOUR WHOLE SELF BELONGS

So, what does it mean to belong?

It means to affirm together who we are and Whose we are. It also means bringing your whole, true, self to the Table. To this place of gathering – on Sunday morning or Saturday night. And to offer that to one another – “no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” As you. The *real*, authentic you self.

We bring ourselves, warts and faith struggles and all. I shared some of that last week – letting you know that I don’t always do so well with the homework I’ve assigned! I shared that glimpse into my “real self” to set the tone – in hopes that we might all comfortably bring our authentic selves to the circle.

And yes, this was a better week – thanks to all of you who asked. Not free of struggles – mother struggles and computer struggles are so fun! But, I tell ya, abiding in the Vine and pruning out that which does not give life and produce fruit is *so* good for the soul –

I highly recommend it! That’s good homework for every week of the year, don’t you think?

“Come as you” are means the pastor too! I’m not sure everyone is comfortable with that, but my pastor colleagues and I are finding in *spades* that if you’re not authentic with your community, then people can’t be authentic with themselves and each other and it’s all a pretty good farce. Jesus was “real” with his disciples. He let them know his struggles. Let them know when he was having a bad or hitting his head against a wall (or table!) or annoyed with a fig tree!

Coming as you are to this place of belonging might mean coming even if you’re not sure you want to be here on Mother’s Day. Bringing yourself fully even if Mother’s Day, or Father’s Day or any “special day” of the year is something you dread.

John Pavlovitz writes a beautiful letter of comfort to those who hurt on Mother’s Day.

He acknowledges that, in spite of the hype, and traditions and Hallmark-helped moments, it might be bittersweet; or even just bitter. If you’re one for whom Mother’s Day is anything but sweet and something to look forward to – due to loss, abuse, regret, unfulfilled dreams and disappointment of *any* kind, take comfort in knowing you are not alone and this day is for you – to be the real you – too.

“Consider this a personal love letter to you who are struggling today;

This is consent to feel fully the contents of your own heart without censorship or guilt or alteration.

If you are hurting, then hurt.

May you feel permission to cry, to grieve, to be not alright.

May you relieve yourself of the burden of pretending everything is fine or faking stability or concealing the damage.

May you find in your very sadness, the proof that your heart though badly broken, still works.

If on this Mother’s Day you are struggling, know that you are not alone.

In this time of great pain, know that you are seen and heard, and that you are more loved than you realize.

Belonging means you don’t have to jump on the bandwagon and fake being something you’re not, or feeling anything other than what you feel and know to be true for you.

III. BELONGING IN LOVE AND RESPECT

“Belonging in covenantal love” also means an honoring of boundaries. Of personal and emotional sacred spheres around ourselves and each other. It might mean speaking the truth in love when someone else’s words or actions hurt. Belonging doesn’t mean carte blanche to do whatever you want, not caring if it hurts another. Belonging means we stay in the circle and work through our similarities and differences – in covenant. Together.

Belonging means you *get to* be in a “safe enough” place for your soul to thrive and feel comfortable and you *get to* offer that to others as well.

IV. DANCE LIKE NO ONE IS WATCHING

Friday Clarke received a text from our friend Jock Bartley and his band you might remember from the 70’s, Firefall, were playing in Colorado Springs that night and they wanted us to come down and hear them. We’re not often free to just jump up and go, but that night it seemed right to “spontaneous ourselves,” so we hopped over to The Stargazer Theater to enjoy some rock and roll from our younger days.

People were mostly sitting and tapping their feet and maybe swaying their heads to the music, but after awhile a few got the courage to get up and dance. We sensed a stir on the “dance floor” behind us and looked over, and there was an older woman with the most wonderful groove on! She was small, had brushed back white hair and the requisite double-knit top that matched the pants and she was dancing moves I’d never seen before! She.was.in.to.it!

We simultaneously looked at each other and mouthed “That could *so* be Mom!” The next moment, we heard someone exclaim, “She’s 86!” The people all around were *mesmerized* by this lovely lady, and the smiles and awe were contagious. I found myself drawn to this woman as if an invisible force *pulled* me

up, out of my seat, and propelled me to hop up, squish past 4 or 5 people and join her in this magnetic energy circle. It was a powerful spiritual force!

I didn't care whether Clarke wanted to join me on the dance floor! I just needed to "get some of what she's got!" He did come up soon and she smiled as big as the ocean and high-fived us – complete strangers – and we became a trio of spirit, fun and life itself.

I wanted nothing more for my Mother's day weekend after that. Being drawn into the aura of this gorgeous creature, dancing *like no one is watching*, to rock-and-roll music played by our friends from our era was a holy moment indeed. It was church. Mother God was in this place and we knew it!

V. BELONGING MEANS EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Another holy moment this week was an outstanding and spirited lecture by Rev. Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite. Susan, a highly respected and spunky theologian with a funny name, was President of CTS for 10 years and still teaches there, but lives in Colorado now, where her soul is fed in needed "wilderness ways." She came as a guest of the Collegiate Peaks Forum Series.

Susan said many many things worthy of pondering, but the #1 inspiration I was left with was how she's changed in her whole approach to life. She realized, as much as she wanted to argue and persuade against social injustices or policies she disagrees with, that it

just doesn't work to use argument to change people's hearts for the good.

You can't change the world or bring people to common perspective by arguing or even persuasion. But, you *can* make an emotional connection with others, and that is an altogether different thing!

Now she uses the "I am a grandmother of five" approach. For example, in a very recent article in this "emotional connection genre" she explains (and I'm paraphrasing here): "I will march to protest violence –*not* because I want to argue what the 2nd amendment means or debate how it is interpreted or misinterpreted. Not because I believe that everyone's guns should be taken away or vice versa. I march because:

"I'm a grandmother of five, and *I worry every day* about gun violence erupting at one of my grandchildren's schools. This isn't normal. This isn't right."

Now, to be clear, this isn't the same as "emotional manipulation" – that everyone from televangelists to politicians to snake oil salesman are so versed in. Some voices we hear are masters at playing on emotions and manipulating crowd mentality to accomplish a one-sided motive.

“Emotional connection” in its purest form is reaching out with a sincere desire to remember we’re all in this together, and to connect the human family at the soul level.

To tap into Mother Teresa’s wisdom and remember in our core:

“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

Thistlethwaite would add to that, “Isn’t that what religion is all about, and why it’s important to us? For religion is about two fundamental questions people ask:

1. What can I trust?
2. Am I alone?

When we seek emotional connection and working together on our problems on this green earth, knowing we all desire the same things: love, belonging and security, that is holy covenantal living indeed.

VI. BELONGING IN HONEST COMMUNITY

How do we belong, together, in covenantal love?

The Refuge, a mission center in Denver, rather than boasting a doctrinal statement, extends an invitation:

We love to throw parties, tell stories, find hope, and practice the ways of Jesus as best we can.

We’re all hurt or hungry in our own ways.

We’re at different places on our journey but we share a guiding story, a sweeping epic drama called the Bible.

We find faith as we follow Jesus and share a willingness to honestly wrestle with God and our questions and doubts.

We find dignity as God’s image-bearers and strive to call out that dignity in one another.

We all receive, we all give.

We are old, young, poor, rich, conservative, liberal, single, married, gay, straight, evangelicals, progressives, overeducated, undereducated, certain, doubting, hurting, thriving.

Yet Christ’s love binds our differences together in unity.

At The Refuge, everyone is safe, but no one is comfortable.

VII. BELONGING MEANS BEING ENCIRCLED

Jesus prays to God our Father/Mother:

⁶“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words

that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost

Bruce Epperly reminds us of the power of this moment:

“Imagine it – Jesus is praying for us! Jesus’ prayer of protection is reaching out to encircle us and give us the courage to face life’s challenges with grace and trust. In our polarizing times, when the right course is in doubt, we need to know that God is with us in all of our uncertainty.

“It’s like the Celtic practice of “Caim” or “encircling” in which before a journey or facing a threat, a person draws a circle around her or himself as a sign that God surrounds him or her on every journey.”

Jesus’ prayer reminds us of the prayer of St. Patrick

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in the eye that sees me,
Christ in the ear that hears me.

We are always encircled by God’s love

You belong. And you, and you and you. In the circle. At the Table. His banner over us – all of us – is Love. Amen.

peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you.

Amen.

STATEMENT OF FAITH

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and