

Ephesians 2:1-10; 11-13, 19-22 Sept. 18, 2022
Col. 3:11-17

BELONGING

Along with these vital questions: who am I? and who do I want to be? There is another important question for us to answer. And our answer to this question is intertwined with answers to the two previous questions. Part and parcel to knowing one's true identity is asking and answering the question "Where do I belong?" Everyone wants to know, needs to know, where they fit in and what group they really belong to. "Where's my tribe?"

One of the reasons some people like uniforms is that they give one a sense of belonging. Clubs and teams, and unfortunately, gangs, give a sense of belonging. The desire to belong is embedded in our human psyche, beginning with family, so much so that when one's family isn't good, one will seek a substitute.

Last week we recalled the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001 – horrific and unimaginable. Many Americans had a renewed sense of belonging back then. I remember the fresh expressions of patriotism, and people showing up in church. But it all quickly faded. These many years later we find our nation plagued by division and identity politics ... the notion that views people as some collective, rather than as a collection of individuals. For political gain people are divided by race, class, religion, and a host of other categories. The sense of belonging to one nation and people proved ephemeral, quickly shattered by promotion of division. I wonder: is identity politics a thing for people without identities? Are they propelled, by an inner yearning for communion with their Creator that has been twisted by sin, to seek a sense of identity in some group or cause?

Beginnings of Belonging

For the vast majority of people who have ever lived, identity is inextricably bound with belonging. Language, culture, national origin, tribe, family are major influences on who one says he/she is and who one associates with. Last week we saw a funny video clip about a woolly mammoth who, raised by possums, identified as a possum and so associated with possums ... until she discovered her true identity. When she discovered her true identity, she found her true affinity. What I am proclaiming to you is that for the Christian, identity in Christ overshadows all the other human identities we might have. Our identity in Christ necessarily brings us into fellowship with others who have found their true identity derived from God. Identity in Christ rises above the divisions of race, national origin, skin color, or sex. It was so from the beginning...

The cities of the Roman Empire were divided by ethnic neighborhoods. From time to time there was strife and "race riots." How counter-cultural the Christians were in this context, drawing in people across race, class, and ethnic lines, sharing meals, caring for one another.

The beginning of wisdom is to *Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture, Psalm 100:3.* Since we are the crown of God's creation, we belong with (and to) God. Sounds simply enough but the majority of those who've ever lived do not want to know God. Humans have this urge to

define their identity outside of God's design. We call this the Fall ... we're fallen from our original state in God's good creation. Hence all the evil and destruction that has befallen the human race. And the problem with every human-made, grand and glorious idea, program, or movement which purports to save humanity and the world, and usher in a utopia of goodness, is that it ultimately fails. Not because the idea isn't beautiful (it's always beautiful in theory), but because it has a false view of humanity; a view that humans are somehow inherently good – or at least the elites are good and know what they are doing. That view is always disproven by history and human behavior. The Bible tells the truth about humanity, revealing that humanity is inherently flawed and sinful; because we're separated from God. As long as people are separated from their Creator, they are *by nature children of wrath ... following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience*, Eph. 2:3.

But through Christ that separation can be bridged; we can recover our true identity rooted in our Creator. *If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creature, the old is gone, new has come*, 2 Corinthians 5:17. By coming to Jesus Christ, we can be healed of the arrogance of sin that locks us in bad choices and behaviors. The Christian realizes this truth: *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me*, Galatians 2:20. When our relationship with our Creator is restored, we will find our true identity and our belonging.

New Identity, New Belonging

The certain identity found in Christ gives us to understand our belonging. We belong to God and belong with God, and we belong with others who've been redeemed by Christ. All around us, people are eagerly searching for community and belonging (isn't social media a part of that search?). For those who are in Christ it leads to Christian community. We were designed for it, even as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit form an eternal community. It is clear that from the very beginning Christian faith meant community of believers, rather than the faith of scattered individuals. In St. Paul's letters, where the phrase "in Christ" appears, he's not talking about some kind of private mysticism. To be "in Christ" is to be "in the Church." Although it goes against the grain of American individualism and post-modern notions of absolute, personal autonomy, anyone who takes Christianity seriously must take the Church seriously. Sure, Christians may at times find themselves alone, but the essence and practice of Christianity is in community. There really is no such thing as solitary Christianity.

A Special Community

The Church is community in a very special sense. It's not just a voluntary gathering, nor a group of activists gathered around a cause, bent on reshaping society (although authentic Christianity will indeed shape a society); it's not a social service agency (although the Church has helped those in need materially and spiritually); neither is it a rally for community organizers, self-help devotees, or celebrity speakers. Nor is it a status: "I'm a church member, therefore I'm good." The authentic Christian Church is a community called into existence by God, dependent upon Him, and whose head is

Christ. *And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, Ephesians 1:22.*

Belonging to this tribe called Christian has nothing to do with race, language, ethnicity, or national origin. It has everything to do with:

1. The Good News - The earliest Christians did not go about arguing for the existence of God or promoting some principles to live by. They spoke about the historical appearance of Jesus and the transformation that took place in their lives. His resurrection meant that God was the victor over sin and death, that they could be in constant personal relationship with a risen Lord, and they traveled the entire Roman Empire and beyond to proclaim these truths. *And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith, 1 Cor. 15:14.* We are not brought together by a set of philosophical ideas, but by a person, Jesus Christ who is God with us. The Church is the only organization on earth that carries the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because the good news of what God has done in Jesus is still the good news today, we still have a vital mission.

2. The Activity of the Holy Spirit - For many Christians there is nothing more mysterious than God manifesting himself right now in peoples' lives as transforming power. The Acts of the Apostles (in the N.T.) could be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, for the early Christians attributed their power and energy to the Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus. *And I will give you another Counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth, John 14:16.* Our Christian tribe is maintained by the power of God at work through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit uses men and women who find Him to help others find God the Father and Jesus Christ His only Son. ... *the Counselor, the Holy Spirit ... will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you, John 14:26.* If we do not make room for the Spirit, the Spirit will not be found among us. Have you made room for Holy Spirit transformation in your life?

3. The Body of Christ. St. Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians, *Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it, 1 Cor. 12:27.* We don't all do the same thing, but each of us is to do essential tasks for the whole body. We belong to the same head: Christ. (See 1 Cor. 12:28-31; Eph. 4:11-13.)

We can learn from businesses, yet we are the body of Christ, not a business. We may learn good practices from other organizations, yet we are an organism not an organization! At all times we should be seeking counsel with Him who is head of it all.

He brings us into fellowship - a togetherness that is stronger than simply sharing work or activities, or potluck meals. *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, Acts. 2:42.* Certainly sharing meals is "breaking bread." But it's the prayer and devotion to the apostles' teaching that really adds the meat to our souls and time together. Fellowship involves prayer and support for one another, sharing of burdens in service to the Lord, building harmony and unity. *Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind, 1 Peter 3:8. ... making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, Eph 4:3.* Churches are weakened when members do not participate in this kind of fellowship.

Never Forget

Scripture tells us that all people are God's creation and have been created in the likeness of God. And God wants all to return to their true identity found in Him. ... *he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance, 2 Peter 3:9.* Scripture also tells us: *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, John 1:12.* Those who receive and believe in Jesus become true children of God. That is because Jesus was and is the only One who can regenerate the image of God in us and heal us of our sinful nature. God's family consists of those who have experienced a spiritual rebirth through Jesus and are now on the path of being transformed into the likeness of God's Son.

The gathering of Christians is the household of God. *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is, 1 John 3:2.* Since the Church is the family of God we try to model our relationships after Jesus and His relationship with the Father and with His disciples and with us. *(Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters - with absolute purity, 1 Tim. 5:1-2.)*

Yes, I know, that is the very problem. Just like our biological families, we don't get to choose who Jesus includes in the family. All of us, in this church family, are still shedding our old identities as we seek to take on our new identity in Christ. "The Church is both holy and sinful. This is the fundamental root of the whole problem of the Church, that it is a union of sinful souls with the Holy God," Lesslie Newbigin, Anglican Bishop.

That's why we must never forget by whom and how we have been brought together. *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light, 1 Peter 2:9.* How often have you heard someone around here declare the praises of Christ who called them out of darkness?

Never forget that God has called us - together - to be with Him, on the winning team. Never forget that we have been redeemed from the darkness of sin, not because of what we've done, but because of what God has done for us through Christ. That's who we are and that's how we belong.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy, 1 Peter 2:10.