

“RE-Planted!”

Easter 7B
John 17:6-19

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From the Pulpit

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Just last week, a high school senior shared with me her decision to leave her family and the state of Ohio to attend college fifteen hundred miles away. I didn't get the sense that she looks to "escape" or "just wants to see Ohio in my rearview mirror." Her words to me were, "I'm going because I just feel like I belong." She has deep roots in Ohio, firmly planted in school, activities and community. But there is this sense that she looks to be RE-Planted somewhere new.

We uproot and RE-plant for many reasons. We uproot and replant because of a job relocation, school, to care for a loved one. Sometimes we uproot for our own safety, or because a natural disaster has come and devastated what we knew and loved. When we uproot....sometimes it's hard to Re-plant. No one says, "It's easy." My prayer for this senior is that she will continue to thrive. Lay down new roots, be fed and watered by knowledge and relationships and begin to grow in new and creative ways. May she find that sense of belonging she seeks.

I think the same thing goes for many in a faith community. Our youth and young adults seek a place where they belong as they figure out what it is they believe. And that's ok. You don't have to have it all figured out in your teens and 20s, even 30s, if ever. Belonging in a place can calm fears and settle hearts. More than a profession of belief, a sense of belonging is a strong component of finding "a spiritual home."

Today's Scripture reading shows Jesus praying for his disciples at the Last Supper. It's part of the farewell discourse in the Gospel of John. Jesus prays about belonging for his disciples. He says to God, "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."

Now, nowhere in the beginning of any of the Gospels can you find a story in which God says, "Here, Jesus, here are your new disciples. They are all alike and worthy and I'm giving them to you." No. In the Gospel stories, Jesus collects disciples in a random way, and the group that ends up following him is a rag-tag band—a foolhardy fisherman named Peter, a political radical called Simon the Zealot, a sell-out tax collector named Matthew, a pair of brothers with bad tempers named James and John, a skeptic named Thomas, and a number of women who didn't at all fit in with their society the second they left their homes and followed.¹

There is no scene in which God ceremoniously delivers these diverse disciples to Jesus. The disciples must each have wondered at some point, "Do I really belong with this group?" Yet here in John, we get a glimpse of the power at work behind

¹ Reference from a colleague at The Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, Rev. Christiane Lang.

the assembling of this rag-tag band. Jesus says to God, “You gave these disciples to me. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me.” In other words, before any of the disciples got up and followed Jesus, they already belonged to God. Even if they didn’t know it. They were claimed by God, even before Jesus took them into his group.

We get caught up in questions of whether we fit in, school, work, or in any particular church. The question of whether we belong haunts us. Jesus’ prayer teaches us something. The first question we should ask is not, “Do I belong with this group of people?” but, “Do I belong to God?” And thank God, the answer to that question is YES.

We belong to God as God’s children, and God is unwilling to ever let us go.

The second thing is this: knowing that we belong to God sets us free. It liberates us from the gnawing question of how well we fit in with people around us. And that’s because when you belong to God, you are in God’s family, so you belong with God’s other children, even if you can’t always see the family resemblance.

What binds us together as brothers and sisters in Christ, or as children of Abraham, is not how much we resemble one another. It’s not whether we have the same education or family

structure. What binds us together is that we belong to God and we trust that we belong. This is why Jesus can continue his prayer and ask, "...protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." Belonging to God leads us to unity with one another amidst our differences.

Being individually set free from worry about whether we belong is necessary for the health of a church or school or group. In any community where people wonder whether they fit in, they're more likely to highlight differences between themselves and others, and to critique others as a way to deflect attention away from themselves.

Just visit any junior high school to see this dynamic in full force. If we are not sure that we belong, we're tempted to ensure that others know they don't belong. But if we are confident of our place in the family, we're not only set free from worrying about our place; We're also set free to welcome each other.

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, author Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

...the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self—to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or

control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.

She continues,

All you have to do is recognize another you “out there”—your other self in the world—for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself. To become that person, even for a moment, is to understand what it means to die to yourself. This can be as frightening as it is liberating. It may be the only real spiritual discipline there is.²

I love that. While Jesus’ prayer for his disciples reminds us that we belong to God and one another. Taylor suggests that the best and highest spiritual work is putting aside our own ego long enough to connect and relate to another human being.

I recently heard a story about a youth group in Tennessee that had a problem with students being excluded. So, the leaders recruited a group of students who felt at home in the church. The leaders said to them, “You know that you belong to God and you belong in this place. Now it’s your turn to help others here learn that they also belong, no matter what they look like or who they are.” Today in that group, any time a student walks in alone or a new student arrives, someone from this

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 2009, p. 93.

squad will approach, give a warm welcome, and introduce that lone student to others.

This squad made its own t-shirts, and on the t-shirts is printed, “We feel awkward so you don’t have to.” That team has also been recruited to welcome adult visitors to the church on Sunday mornings, so good have they become at helping others know they belong. Knowing that we belong to God sets us free to welcome others.

Near the end of today’s Scripture reading, Jesus says to the Holy One, “They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world....As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” We belong to God, and God sets us into a community of belonging. But we can’t stop there. If we end with a community that only focuses inward, then we have not yet done as Christ intends.

Since we know we belong to God and one another, we are called to proclaim this news in word and deed to a world desperately in need of hearing it, a world to which we do not belong, but to which we are sent. We do not belong to this world because we have been transformed by the knowledge that we belong to a loving, holy God, and our speech and behavior reflect that belonging. We are sent, because this good

news isn't just for us—by its very nature, it reaches out to include all people.

Today, we have examples in Kendall and Emma and Zoe. Their example of caring and compassion for their loved ones mirror that of Jesus. Into their care, they took those whom God has already called a beloved child and shown the world the very meaning of Christian love. May you all with your families continue to feel God's love and care for you.

Next week, we celebrate Pentecost and the birth of the church by the power of the Holy Spirit. We will also confirm six of our youth through Confirmation. We gather to remember who we are and whose we are. Each and every day may we come to understand how we grow into the fullness of who God created us to be. Each unique. Each with our own skills and abilities and quirky personalities that makes church so exciting.

At our best, we live into the commandment Jesus gave to his disciples (and to us) to love the LORD your God with all your heart and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. The greatest spiritual work we will do is to connect and relate to others, praying for them and caring for them, showing the Love of Christ along the way. May it be so. Amen.

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