

Belonging to A Family of Faith, The Body of Christ
Galatians 3:27-9; Romans 12:4-5; Ephesians 4:25; I Peter 2:9-10
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Jesus came not only to start a movement—a movement of the love of God and neighbor—he came to form a community, a family of faith, what Paul called the Body of Christ. Here is one of the key meanings of Baptism: Belonging to a family of faith, the Body of Christ.

Jesus saw the community he was forming as a new kind of family. Those who joined him were his mother, brother, sister. On the cross he looked down at his mother Mary and at his young disciple John and gave them into the care of one another. “Behold your mother; behold your son.” A new family was being formed, “more large than home”, deeper and broader than our blood family.

I have chosen the word “belonging” as a key word today. Baptism is a sign of belonging, belonging to God and to one another in our family of faith.

Is there a deeper human need than belonging? We try in America to champion an extreme individualism, but this project will fail. Maya Angelou in her poem “Alone”, writes

Lying, Thinking

Last night

How to find my soul a home
Where the water is not thirsty
And bread loaf is not stone
And I came up with one thing
And I don't believe I'm wrong
That nobody
But nobody
Can make it here alone.

I

So here is my model of the church using a Venn Diagram with three overlapping, intersecting circles. The church is a community of Belonging, Believing and Beloving. Each circle is crucial, and they all overlap.

The top circle is *Belonging*. We are first a community of belonging, a place to belong to God and to one another.

When Gary was pastor here and we would join hands at the end of the service, he would say, "hold on tight." The joined hands and the words were about Belonging.

The second circle, below and to the left is the circle of *Believing*. We are a community who are believing together some important things about God, about who we are and about the world.

We do not have a creed, nor do we demand a uniformity of beliefs. But together we seek to form a faith that brings life and undergirds life. For example, this part of an affirmation of faith in the Iona community is important and life-giving to me:

We affirm God's goodness at the heart of humanity, planted more deeply than all that is wrong.

The beliefs that bring us life are not the beliefs we *have* to believe, but those we *need* to believe.

But believing is deeper than *beliefs*. It is a matter of the heart: *trust*, trust in the goodness of the God Jesus called *Abba*, the One who loves us completely, unconditionally and will never stop loving us. It is deeper than believing this or that particular belief. It is a believing *in*, in a relationship of trust. Faith is a verb: Believing.

The third circle, below and to the right is *Beloving*. This is something we *do* as followers of Jesus: acts of compassion and justice, acts that embody the love of

God to our neighbor. As *James* says, “faith without works is dead”, or as we might paraphrase today, “Believing without Beloving is dead.”

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer was awaiting execution in Hitler’s prison he asked, “What do we really believe? I mean believe in such a way that our lives depend on it?” Of the church he wrote: “The church is the church only as it is there for others.”¹

The mission of the church is at its heart *the increase in the love of God and neighbor*. When we are doing this, we are the church. And we do it as a community of belonging, believing and beloving.

II

As Paul thought about the church one of his favorite phrases was that we are “members of one another.” We are not first members of an institution or organization but members of one another in the Body of Christ. As such when one hurts we all hurt, and when one rejoices we all rejoice.

As Paul develops this metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ we are all different parts of the Body with different gifts and different needs. We honor everyone’s gifts and everyone’s needs.

This image of the church also has a ethical dimension in how we relate to one another, how we can love and not hurt each other. So Paul says, we put away

falsehood and speak truly, and when we speak the truth we speak the truth in love.

Baptist churches do not have *creeds*, but most have *covenants*, covenants that express how we want to live in community. We covenant to live together in ways that honor the dignity and worth of every person. We do not let disagreements tear at the fabric of the church. Our differences are something we honor as we walk the path together toward the deepest truth that always lies ahead.

III

Now let's turn to Paul's revolutionary words in Galatians:

For as many of you have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

These words reflect the way Jesus lived as he welcomed all into the kingdom of God and crossed the boundaries of race, religion, nation and gender to bring the love of God to all

So Paul carried this vision of Jesus into his vision of the church, where all distinctions that divide us, race, class, nationality, gender and religion are broken down. It was a social revolution in the making, a vision that still challenges us.

Someone said that with these words Paul put a powder keg under our unjust social structures. It is *we* who have lengthened the fuse!

Can we form a community where male and female, gay and straight, white, black, brown, rich and poor and everyone in between, more educated and less educated, I.Q. (we are learning that there are *multiple* intelligences), liberal and conservative can live together in love? These differences have lost their power to divide. We can, if we are *baptized into Christ*, that is, if our hearts and minds are baptized.

I know this is what you want us to be. I asked you to write down at our retreat what the gospel, the good news was to you, the good news you wanted us to offer the community. Overwhelmingly you replied: We welcome all people into the arms of God's love and into our arms. All.

There have always been minority movements within Christianity, often at the edges, who have taken the way of Jesus and the vision of Paul seriously.

Quakers, for example, who believe that every person carries within them the "inner light" of God, so all should be treated with dignity. So they were among the first in America to oppose the institution of slavery, and they first gave up all their own slaves and paid them for labor rendered.

And they changed their language too. In their day whether you used “Thou” or “you” in addressing another was based on social rank. They chose to use the word “Thou” in their address to all people so to abolish class distinction. Sometimes we alter language so better to honor all people.

IV

Now to the last text, from I Peter, his words about the church:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.... Once you were no-people, but now you are God’s people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Lets’ look at a few of his images of the church. First, “chosen people”. The phrase “chosen people” has been used to do terrible things in history, so we use it carefully. We have been chosen by God to tell people that we are all chosen. Just as Abraham and Sarah were told that they and their descendants would be blessed that they may be a blessing to all the earth. We now know that we are the Beloved of God that we may tell all people that they too are the Beloved.

We are a “royal priesthood”. The Protestant Reformation ignited a spiritual revolution it called “The priesthood of all believers”. All of us are called to be priests. Baptism is the ordination of all Christians to be ministers. It meant, as

Carlyle Marney emphasized, that we are “priests to each other.” We offer the grace of God to one another in the sacrament of love.

We at Grace have this as one of our core values: We are all ministers here! There is no spiritually elite class called “clergy”. If I ever act like that, you remind me otherwise. You, as the saying goes, “disabuse me of that notion.”

And lastly this: God has called us into being. Once we were no-people. Now we are God’s people. Once we had no place to belong, now we have a place to belong.

And it’s all by the *mercy of God*, Peter says, lest you think we are better than most to be God’s people: “For once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy.”

We call ourselves here: Grace Baptist Church. We could just as well call ourselves Mercy Baptist Church, for that is how we are here, God’s people called into being by the mercy of God.

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) pp. 502-3.