

Our Needs Are Holy to God: The Need to Belong  
Galatians 4:4-7, Romans 12:4-5

June 21

One of the deepest human needs is the need to belong. It is built into our D.N.A. We are hard wired with the need to belong because without belonging we would not survive—as a species and as persons. Our needs are holy to God, and this is one of them.

But belonging can have a price too. And if belonging to a family, a person, a church, a social group requires us to stifle what is dearest to us, our personhood, our integrity, even our safety, then it is too dear a price to pay. It is incumbent then for parents, families, churches, communities to create a healthy place of belonging.

I

A child has a physical, emotional, spiritual need to belong. God placed Jesus in the hands of a family, with a mother and father to care for him and give a place of belonging.

In my churches through the years I have led a child dedication for infants, one by one, as they came into the world. The parents and the congregation made vows to bring the new child up in the love and ways of God. The eyes of the parents and congregation glistened with the love for this child. It was like the whole congregation was adopting the child as their own.

Here is one of the deepest meanings of *redemption*: Being Wanted. I had never thought of this before I read Alister McGrath's little book, *Redemption*. In it he discusses the major meanings of the redemption we have in Christ. The first one was a surprise: "Being Wanted". Paul spoke of this as *adoption*:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those under the law so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children of God, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

A child needs to hear and feel the words “You are wanted!” Parents, whether through child birth or adoption are saying, “You are Wanted! You are loved! We are your first place of belonging.”

There is a reason so many children’s books and adult classics have an orphan as the main character. An orphan looking for a place to belong, a place to be wanted. This need to

belong is so deep a need and this yearning to belong so deep. A famous black spiritual touches us at this point:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child...

A long way from home.

The song's roots are in slavery where so many slaves were ripped from their families for the greater profit of slave owners.

The need to belong includes the needs for bread, water, warmth, safety and security, to love and be loved, but goes beyond. And it follows us all our lives. A principal calling of the church is to be a place of belonging for us all.

## II

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”. It began

with his calling of the 12 disciples, so to symbolize a new Israel, and then he called a faithful circle of women disciples.

I have pictured the church as a Venn diagram of three intersecting circles. The first circle at the top is *Belonging*. The church is a community of belonging. The second circle below and to the left is *Believing*. We have a shared set of beliefs and values as we follow the way of Jesus. The third circle is *Beloving*, that is, we are engaged in acts of compassion for others and acts of justice which is love on a bigger scale.

But the top circle is Belonging, for it is such a deep human need. God wants and provides for us a community of belonging. Paul's favorite metaphor for the church was "The Body of Christ." We are all parts of the body with our unique individual gifts to offer the community and needs which the community of Christ seeks to meet. Paul made a point that the

Body needs to exert special care for those the world might regard as “weaker” or “lesser”, even as “disreputable”.

We are, he said, “members of one another”. It was one of his favorite phrases, and a powerful image of belonging. We belong to each other and are connected in ways we can scarcely fathom. So Paul said, we live carefully with one another, that is, full of care. When one member rejoices, we all rejoice, when one member hurts, we all hurt.

### III

But this being “members of one another” applies to the whole world. We are all of us, on this planet, in this nation, “members of one another.”

Wendell Berry in his writings lifts this value, this recognition high. We are all part of what he calls, The

Membership which includes us all and all the created realm.

One of his characters in a short story, Burley Coulter says:

The way we are, we are members of one another. All of us.

Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't. 1

The church is a community who knows it, or should know it.

The pandemic in which we live is reminding in the starkest life and death terms that we are members of one another.

Wearing masks is away of saying we know it!

The present upheaval over George Floyd's death is awakening more of us to the truth that we are members of one another. We are being given new eyes to see the ravages of systemic racism and racial inequity which are a plague on our brothers and sister of color and a wound that won't heal until we see we are all part of the same body.

## IV

I think we all have a spiritual longing for oneness with God and with others, a longing to belong. More people than we know, most people I think, have days and times when they say, “I don’t fit in, I don’t fit in anywhere.” Have you ever felt that? You are not alone.

The gospel seeks to address this cosmic loneliness. You are orphans no more. You belong to God, and to God’s community. The gospel is not the exclamation “You’re lost!” but the glad good news, “You’re found!”

## V

Now let’s talk about the shadow side of belonging. It is the kind of belonging that exacts a price, a price that a relationship or community demands and a price whose cost we are willing to pay because we so need to belong. In childhood the child



alternates between the need to belong and the need for autonomy, the need for approval and the need to discover who they are. Teenagers have a sometimes excruciating need to belong to a group of peers, sometimes at a cost to their deepest, truest self.

As we go through our lives we try to negotiate the need to belong with the need to be true to oneself. Belonging and personal integrity do not need to be in conflict, but sometimes they are, which brings a crisis of choice. Will I stay in this group or will I be true to myself? The high rate of suicide among gay young people comes from such a crisis, a crisis of choice between belonging and being true to themselves and who they are. Some reach the place of despair where they do not know how it will ever be resolved.

This is the issue in all relationships, marriages and groups to which we belong. Is the price of staying, of belonging, too high a price to pay?

Brene Brown talks a lot about belonging. She says that unless we can belong to ourselves, we cannot freely, truly, healthily belong to another. So, one great task of living is to belong to yourself.

Can the church be a healthy place of belonging? Yes, if it honors and supports the flourishing of all its members. If it allows differences of thinking and living. If it does not seek to force everyone into one mold. There's an ancient Jewish midrash on the Genesis passage about God's creation of us. It says if a human had created the world, it would be like a minter of coins making every coin exactly alike, from the same mold.

But God the Minter has created a world where every coin is unique.

A healthy community says, Come, this is a place of belonging you can be part of without sacrificing your deepest, truest self, a place where you can belong to us and belong to yourself.

I think this is what we aspire to at Grace Baptist, even if we can't always pull it off. Our covenant says that all are welcome here, whoever you are, and wherever you are on your journey of faith. We honor "the dignity of difference", and even find delight in it. We want this place to be a place of deep belonging and one dedicated to the flourishing of every individual.

Here is our message to one another and to all who may come to us: "You are wanted, by God and by us. Here is a place where you can come and be who you are without fear. This is

Christ's ministry of hospitality, the glad welcome of all into the kingdom of God, and this is our ministry too. People are dying every day, or wishing they were dying for the want of this kind of belonging.

Our needs are holy to God, this one too: the need to belong!

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1. Wendell Berry, *The Wild Birds* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), pp. 136-7.