

Because You Belong

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
for Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan
October 5, 2020*

Scripture

Philippians 3:2-9

Sermon

Human beings have a number of basic needs. We need food and water; we need clothing and shelter; we need work and rest. We also need to belong. Because it's not good for us to be alone (Genesis 2:18).

Sometimes we try really hard to belong. We work out and bulk up so we can be on the football team. We practice our instrument so we can be part of a band. Or we pay our dues—sometimes blood, sometimes cash—so we can be a member of a gang, or a country club.

Belonging matters. Sometimes it's the difference between life and death.

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Today's Scripture, from Philippians 3, is about belonging. That's not a surprise. Because wherever the Apostle Paul went, the question kept coming up: "Who belongs?"

Take the church in Corinth. Those people argued about belonging. They said, "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Apollos" or "I belong to Cephas" or even "I belong to Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:12 NRSV). "Who belongs?" That was the Corinthian question. And they weren't the only ones.

CERTAIN JEWISH CHRISTIANS WERE ASKING THE SAME QUESTION. As far they were concerned, to really belong to the church you had to almost become a Jew. Otherwise you were just a dog, an evildoer, a mutilator of the flesh. That was a widespread Jewish opinion about pagan Gentiles. They were filthy dogs with no moral compass who scarred and tattooed themselves to please their phony "gods."

And so certain Jewish Christians insisted that Gentile Christians had to line up with the law of Moses. That meant they had to change in several specific ways. It was simple: "Change your behavior. Change your diet." And for the men—"Change your penis." That was the only way for Gentile Christians to belong, to really belong, to the church.

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“But they have it all wrong!” That’s what the Apostle insisted. “Truth is, they are the dogs, they are the evildoers, they are the flesh-mutilators. To them it’s all about fore-skins. But circumcision is not about the flesh! It’s about the heart.”

THE APOSTLE KNEW WHAT HE WAS TALKING ABOUT. Because when it came to being Jewish, he belonged like nobody’s business. They gave him the big cut when he was eight days old. And ever since then, Paul had devoted himself to being as Jewish as he could be. The law of Moses was his life. He kept that law and he defended that law as far as anyone ever could.

So there was no question at all. Paul absolutely belonged to the chosen people of God. That’s what he means when he refers to his “righteousness based on the law.”

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Now, when we hear that word, “righteousness,” we think about someone who is holy. We think about someone with good morals and a good prayer life. Or, if we’re more theologically inclined, we think about someone who has been cleansed and covered by the holiness of Jesus.

But that’s not what the Apostle means by the word “righteousness.” Righteousness is not about your personal holiness or about the holiness of Jesus applied to you. Righteousness is about belonging. Someone who is “righteous” is someone who belongs to the people of God.

BUT HOW DOES THAT HAPPEN? Do you belong to the people of God because you obey all the rules and regulations? Do you belong because you keep the Ten Commandments? Or because you pattern your life after the Sermon on the Mount? Do you belong because you are kind and generous and forgiving? In other words, do you belong to the people of God because of your own personal faithfulness to Jesus Christ and to the Kingdom of God?

The answer to that question is No, not at all. Paul was as faithful as faithful could be, first as a Jew, then as a Christian. But he did not belong to the people of God because of his own faithfulness. No. Just like the rest of us, he belonged because of the faithfulness of Jesus.

Bible translations are just now catching up with the best scholarship. And when they do, it’s clear what Paul means in Philippians 2:9. He means, “I don’t belong to the people of God because of my own faithfulness to the law of God; I belong because of the faithfulness of Christ.”

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And here's how Paul describes the faithfulness of Christ. It's in the previous chapter.

Being in the form of God,
Jesus Christ did not regard equality with God
as something to take advantage of,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

So Jesus faithfully fulfills the will of his Father by going all the way to a shameful and grisly death. And for that reason, the Father gives a people to Jesus. Which means we don't belong to Jesus because of any qualifications we meet. We belong simply because the Father gives us to Jesus. And we belong to Jesus body and soul, in life and in death and in the age to come (see Heidelberg Catechism, A1).

BELONGING IS IMPORTANT. We need to belong. But life comes at us hard. And sometimes the message is clear. We don't belong anywhere. You know what I'm talking about.

Prison sends a powerful message. It says you don't belong. It says you don't belong with the good citizens of Michigan. It says you need to be cut off like so much unwanted and unnecessary flesh. (Circumcision, anyone?)

Prison is hard on any sense of belonging. And what comes after prison is hard, too. Even if you're a CPI graduate. Even if you complete a vocational program and get one of those plum jobs on the outside.

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In Genesis 4, Cain has a mark on him. It was for his protection, so no one would jump him. But it also marked him forever as a threat, as an outsider, as someone to avoid, someone who would never really belong.

When you get out, you'll have a mark, too. You'll have a record. You'll have those obvious prison tattoos. And maybe you'll have a permanent spot on the sex offender registry. Just try to belong with all that going against you!

LOOK, I'M NOT BRINGING THIS STUFF UP TO DISCOURAGE YOU. And I know I'm not telling you anything you don't know. You've already made your own journey into de-

spair. And I hope and pray that by God's grace you have found a way to make peace with that despair. To set it aside. To move forward from it.

It's with that in mind that I want you to understand this: **You belong. Because of Jesus, you belong.**

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When Jesus committed himself to the awful destiny of the cross, do you know what he received from the Father as a reward? **You. He received you.**

Now, maybe you can't imagine how you could ever be a reward to anyone for anything. But you are. Because you are a treasure. Because you reflect the image of God. Like a classic car, even when there's rust and bondo and primer, there is still something basically beautiful about you. And it's a beauty that Jesus is committed to revealing and shining up to a high polish.

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No, you don't belong to God's people, you don't belong to Jesus, because you're kind and generous and forgiving. But you are becoming kind and generous and forgiving because you belong. And you are modeling your life after the Sermon on the Mount because you belong. Because Jesus has claimed you as his own. Because Jesus is working on you by the Holy Spirit. And because Jesus is committed to making you shine.

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Glory and thanks be to God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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