

11-14-21

“Belonging”

Deuteronomy 6: 4-9

Second Scripture: Romans 12:1-2,4-5

The letter to the Romans was one of the last - if not the last - pieces of writing from the apostle Paul. It reflects over 20 years of teaching, preaching, and writing. Unlike others of his letters, it was not written to a church he founded - or church he had ever visited. It was written to a group of believers who were trying to figure out how to be a church with people of varied backgrounds and customs - Jewish believers and Gentile believers. Paul stresses that there is “one gospel for all humanity.” Hear these words from the 12th chapter Paul’s letter to the Romans, with that frame in mind.

Romans 12:1-2,4-5

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect...

...For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos, we believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death, we belong to God. This is a powerful statement, so I want to repeat it...As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos, we believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death, we belong to God.

For those wondering where that statement came from, it is the opening of the church’s mission statement. When I read that statement in the Ministry Information Form (or MIF) as part of the call process, it immediately captured my attention. It is a bold statement. It is a grounding statement. It is a statement of conviction. It is a statement of hope. And more than anything, it is a statement of an **embodied** promise.

And on this first Sunday of a new chapter at the Presbyterian Church of Okemos, I want to embrace the concept of “belonging” – a concept that can be countercultural at times in a world where self-sufficiency, individualism, and personal liberty are encouraged and celebrated. What does it mean for us to “belong to God” in body, soul, and mind? What does it mean to embrace that our individual stories are part of deeper, richer narrative of collective stories we hear in scripture? Names that may be familiar to us like Abraham and Sarah, Noah and Moses, Hannah and Ruth – people who experienced joy and profound sorrow, success and frustration; people who tried to be faithful, but had their moments of doubt and disobedience. And stories of the unnamed men and women, old and young who bore witness to God’s faithfulness. To “belong to God” in life and in death and life beyond death is first and foremost a recognition that we belong to a larger story.

We heard the call to remember that bigger story in the scripture Kent shared from the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, words that Moses spoke to the second generation of Israelites as they were waiting to enter the promised land....

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

I so love this passage of scripture. To our Jewish brothers and sisters, this passage is known as the Shema Yisrael – the Hebrew word for the opening of verse 4 – Hear, O Israel – it is an imperative – a command. This is the way we are to live. Not only are we to keep all of God’s decrees and commandments, but we are to recite them to our children and talk about them no matter where we are and at all times. We are to sing of our belonging, as we will do in our final hymn today – thank you Marlene for including a paraphrase of the Shema in the service. *The Lord is God*. In life and death and in life beyond death we belong to God. We recite this, we sing this because we need to be reminded, just like the Israelites so many years ago.

For the Israelites wandering through the land, waiting to enter the land flowing with milk and honey, they needed to be reminded that the law – the statutes and the ordinances— that Moses taught them were the real deal. This was not a practice quiz – these were guidelines that they were to live by, beginning with the first commandment, with Lord telling them through Moses “You shall have no other gods before me.” That commandment is retold in chapter 6 in the positive: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” This commandment is repeated in the gospels. The law and the gospel share this message of embodiment – it is who we are to be, who we are to become.

Part of the task for Moses as he led the people from slavery in Egypt into freedom in the promised land was to help them form an identity – a new identity as worshippers of the Lord God. The Deuteronomy passage – the Shema – ends with Moses telling the people to “Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead...” The Hebrew word for “bind” has the connotation to knit together to make stronger, for two things to become inseparable. That is God’s plan for us – for God’s word to become inseparable with our being – with our heart and our mind and our soul. As Paul says in the passage from Romans that I read – for us to be transformed.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. Part of the transformation is to move beyond seeing each other as differences or obstacles or “the other.”

Paul continues...For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We are members of one another. Sounds a lot like belonging to me.

The apostle Paul repeatedly describes how in Christ we are to see each other as one body and our differences as gifts, not threats, to one another. Paul wants us to understand that people are

different because the Spirit has given them differing gifts, such that we, who are many become one body in Christ.

It is not about what we can individually achieve, rather it is about how the Holy Spirit works to transform us as unique individuals into the church – the body of Christ – here on earth. And friends, this transformation is no easy task. Paul gives us a hint as to how this transformation happens when he says that it is the Spirit who has given us differing gifts. It is the Holy Spirit, that third person of the Trinity – the one that I think we Presbyterians sometime don't highlight enough – it is the Holy Spirit who is this agent of transformation. Following the sermon we will share together a portion of the *Brief Statement of Faith, found in the PC(USA) Book of Confession* from which the PCO mission statement emerges. Farther on in the *Brief Statement* we hear these words that remind us of the power of the Holy Spirit to transform us.

We trust in God the Holy Spirit everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church. The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.

In a recent devotional I read, Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and writer on spirituality, says it this way, “Through the Church, in the Body of Christ, God calls us to a new way of living, a new way of relating to God, to others, and to the world. Paul believes the Church is meant to be a community whose way of living runs contrary to the prevailing culture. We would call it *countercultural* today. It is a way of cooperating rather than competing, a way of giving rather than getting, a way of sharing rather than hoarding, a way of sacrifice rather than comfort, a way of faith rather than knowledge, a way of relationship rather than anonymity, a way of love rather than animosity. Through membership in the Body of Christ, this way of living is a sharing in the life of Christ.¹

Talk about countercultural... a way of cooperating rather than competing, a way of giving rather than getting, a way of sharing rather than hoarding, a way of sacrifice rather than comfort, a way of faith rather than knowledge, a way of relationship rather than anonymity, a way of love rather than animosity.

These are principles that I have seen embodied by this church and its members in stories I have heard during my first week and while I was learning about the church. These are principles I pray we deepen as a community of faith here at the Presbyterian Church of Okemos, so that as the body of Christ our ministry together will be a witness of light in the darkness.

In our world today it can be hard to have the sense of belonging that those of previous generations might have had – where neighborhood, work, church, and school ties were tightly interwoven. In his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, political scientist Robert Putnam writes about the changes in our society that reflect our looser connectedness to each other, from declines in church membership to the dramatic decrease in involvement in social and philanthropic organizations and bowling leagues. These losses of

¹ https://cac.org/paul-a-new-creation-2021-07-08/?utm_source=cm&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=dm&utm_content=summary

social capital can be seen in the fragmentation and polarization of our society, where we fail to recognize that what we have in common is greater than that which separates us. And we too often miss out on the joy of belonging – the joy of being part of something bigger than individual selves. This is where the church can excel. This is where I pray PCO will excel – of being a place where cares and concerns and joys and the good news of the gospel are all bound together. All bound together and shared. We will do it imperfectly, as humans do; but we will keep trying; we will forgive the slights and we will give each other grace when we mess up, remembering the grace upon grace bestowed on us by our God. And at the beginning and end and the middle of each day we will remember what matters most is that we belong to God.

One of the best descriptions I have seen about this call of the church – the call of the Body of Christ- is from the Ann Weems² in her poem “Balloons Belong in Church.”³The whole poem is wonderful – the poem is long, I am just going to share a portion of it with you as an encouragement for us as we embark on a new chapter....Weems shares about what she – we should celebrate...

I celebrate anger at injustice
I celebrate tears for the mistreated, the hurt, the lonely...
I celebrate the community that cares... the church...
I celebrate the church.
I celebrate the times when we in the church made it...
When we answered a cry
When we held to our warm and well-fed bodies a lonely world.

I celebrate the times when we let God get through to our hiding places
Through our maze of meetings
Our pleasant facade...deep down to our selfhood
Deep down to where we really are.
Call it heart, soul, naked self
It's where we hide
Deep down away from God
And away from each other.

I celebrate the times when the church is the Church
When we are Christians
When we are living, loving, contributing God's children...
I celebrate that He calls us His children even when we are in hiding.
I celebrate love...the moments when the You is more important than the I
I celebrate the perfect love...the cross...the Christ
loving in spite of...
giving without reward

Weems ends with these words:
So celebrate!
Bring your balloons and your butterflies, your bouquets of flowers...
Bring the torches and hold them high!

² <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/3/22/ann-weems-presbyterian-poet-laureate-dies-age-81/>

³ <https://www.lafpres.org/single-post/2020/06/10/musings-6102020-balloons-in-church>

Dance your dances, paint your feelings, sing your songs, whistle, laugh.
Life is a celebration, an affirmation of God's love.
Life is distributing more balloons.
For God so loved the world...
Surely that's a cause for Joy.
Surely we should celebrate!
Good News! That He should love us that much.
Where did we ever get the idea that balloons don't belong in the church?

While we don't have balloons in church this morning, we will be celebrating the joyful feast of the people of God when we come to the communion table. So I invite you to come with joy in your hearts and celebrate this community – a community who -through the power of the Holy Spirit – is being transformed and working to transform the community and the world. And I am so delighted to finally be here with you all on this journey!

Join me in prayer... and now I invite you to join with me as we affirm what we believe from the *Brief Statement of Faith*

Affirmation of Faith from A Brief Statement of Faith

In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.