

TITLE: "Belonging" (WORLD COMMUNION)

Text: John 10:1-10 (NT p. 103)

Introduction – Dogs and cats

There is a marked personality difference between most dogs and cats. My sister Liz has a pair of Wheaton Terriers and last Sunday she washed and clipped them, which they don't mind. Since their hair grows right over their eyes, they are actually grateful to be able to see once again. For most dogs, water is NOT a problem.

I also came across this little story about a cat. ...Johnny's mother looked out the window and noticed him "playing church" with their cat. He had the cat sitting quietly and was preaching to it. She smiled and went about her work.

A while later she heard loud meowing and hissing and ran to the open window to see Johnny baptizing the cat in a tub of water. She called out, "Johnny, stop that! The cat is afraid of water!"

Johnny looked up and said, "He should have thought about THAT before he joined my church." (And, if you look on the sermon outline page, you will see pictures of unbaptized and baptized cats.)

...It's a lot easier for me to picture a church full of dogs than it is a church full of cats. Most dogs seem to NEED companionship. Most cats seem merely to tolerate one another. The same may be true of people. Some seem to want the companionship of a church family and some do not.

And yet, every person NEEDS to be part of a church family. Why? Because that is the way we are made. God made us with two needs: the need for a relationship with GOD and the need for relationships with PEOPLE. That is what heaven is all about. In heaven, we will see Jesus face-to-face and we will be with our loved ones forever.

In talking about heaven, Jesus says, "In my Father's house, there are many rooms..." (John 14:6). Whether we know it or not, each of us is homesick, homesick for our heavenly home and these heavenly relationships. The Lord has blessed us with our church family so we will have a glimpse of what heaven will be like here on earth.

1. Belonging to a church family

In our text for this morning, Jesus says: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and [they] will come in and go out and find pasture." ...E. Stanley Jones writes: "When Jesus says, 'enters by me' he means you'll have a sense of BELONGING." This morning I will be preaching on our need to belong.

Last week I referred to the book A Secure Base by John Bowlby. In it he gives an illustration of a mother sitting on a park bench while her four-year-old son plays on the grass. At first, the boy stays very close to his mother, but soon he is wandering farther away, although he keeps looking back to be sure his mother is still there. In a little while, he strays quite far, but trips and hurts his knee. He runs back to his mother, she comforts him, tells him it's all right, and encourages him to go back and play, which he does. Eventually, he is comfortable playing some distance away because he knows that his secure base, his mother, will be there if he needs her.

Bowlby goes on to say that people who had a parent, or parents, who provided a secure base for them as children, usually were emotionally STABLE and were able to form healthy relationships as adults.....People who experienced a secure base only SOME of the time as children, often struggled with anxiety and although they knew they needed healthy relationships, they also resisted them to some degree.....People who had NO secure base as children, often avoided healthy relationships altogether as adults.

As I mentioned a couple Sundays ago, our national security, financial security and personal security is a lot less secure than it used to be, and that makes it harder for parents to BE a secure base. Therefore, it's not difficult to see why there are so many insecure people and why so many marriages and families are in crisis these days.

It also easy to see why fewer and fewer people are joining churches. Based on Bowlby's findings, I theorize that people who had a secure base only part of the time may know they need healthy church family relationships, but will resist them to some degree. People who had no secure base as children, may avoid healthy church family relationships as adults. ...So how can we reach people who are unwilling or unable to get involved in a church?

a) We need to reach out to INDIVIDUAL people and families

The church needs to go to them. We need to search for individuals who need the faith that we have. This is exactly what Jesus tells to do (Luke 15:1-7):

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So [Jesus] told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.”

Jesus said he came to help those who were sick, not those who were well. That is why we, as Christians, are here; to help the sick and to find the lost.

b) We need to be HUMBLE

To be able to reach out to the sick and lost, we must be humble. The church is not a stage for the righteous. The church is a hospital for sinners. We need to let the lost people who come into our lives know that we need Jesus just as much as they do. If a lost person gets even a whiff of self righteousness or judgment, he or she will turn away. ...Let me read you a poem that a friend recently sent by email:

I was shocked, confused, bewildered
As I entered Heaven's door,
Not by the beauty of it all,
Nor the lights or its decor.

But it was the folks in Heaven
Who made me sputter and gasp--
The thieves, the liars, the sinners,
The [druggies] and the trash.

There stood the kid from seventh grade
Who swiped my lunch money twice.
Next to him was my old neighbor
Who never said anything nice.

Herb, who I always thought
 Was rotting away in hell,
 Was sitting pretty on cloud nine,
 Looking incredibly well.

I nudged Jesus, 'What's the deal?
 I would love to hear Your take.
 How'd all these sinners get up here?
 God must've made a mistake.

'And why's everyone so quiet,
 So somber - give me a clue.'
 'Hush, child,' He said, 'they're all in shock.
 No one thought they'd be seeing you.'

Each lost person in heaven was found by a Christian on earth. Let us be sure we love like Jesus rather than judge like the Pharisees and scribes.

c) Introduce the lost to JESUS

Finally, we need to introduce the lost to Jesus. If we try to be the answer to too many people, we will just get worn out. WE are NOT the answer. Jesus is the answer.
Let me tell you a story by Correy ten Boom.

Just after WWII, there were a lot of homeless people in Moscow. One of these wandering men entered a massive apartment complex and began knocking on doors to see if anyone had a warm place for him to sleep.

Finally, a Christian couple and their two children led him to the basement where the floor was divided into squares for families to pile the things that wouldn't fit in their apartments. They made him as comfortable as possible in their pile of stuff and told him they would come back later with some food.

After dinner, the family was bringing him some food, and as they came down the cellar stairs, they heard someone playing Tchaikovsky on the violin. They were amazed to see that it was the street person playing this concert quality music, and they were astonished to see that he was playing it on the wife's violin.

When he finished the piece, the woman exclaimed, “That is my violin, but it was broken beyond repair! How ever did you fix it?”

The man said, “I was not always a street person. Before the War, my father and I owned a music shop. We also made violins. Years ago I made this violin ...and what I made, I can always fix.”

God made each person. Each person needs to belong to a church family. If they are too broken to belong, then we need to bring them to Jesus and let God fix them just as God fixed each of us.

Conclusion – Communion is glimpse of heavenly belonging

In Isaiah 43, God says: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you belong to me. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire, you will not be burned, and the flame will not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (43:1b-3a).

In LIFE and in DEATH, we BELONG to God. And in baptism, we become a member of God’s family. And when we partake of the Lord’s Supper, we have communion with Jesus and with each other. Listen to what Martin Luther said:

As the BREAD is kneaded together out of so many grains, ...and each single grain loses its body and its form, and shares in the common body of the bread, and similarly also the little grapes, losing their separate form, unite to make the common body of the JUICE—so should it be, and so it is with us when we rightly use this sacrament.

We are God’s family. In LIFE and in DEATH, we belong to God. We also belong to this church family and to the church family of Christians around the world. As we partake of the bread and juice, let us be aware, and deeply grateful, that we BELONG to God and also BELONG to God’s family.

Amen.

John 10:1-10

'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.