



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Belonging
Rev. Dr. Laird Stuart

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Deuteronomy 6:4-9
Matthew 22:34-40

Every now and then someone will say something and it sticks to us. For whatever reasons we do not forget it. Maybe it was a compliment, something that was more than just a casual pat on the back but a comment that seemed to capture something about our self we value. Maybe it was a sharp and stinging rebuke, a rebuke we had to admit we deserved. Maybe it was something eloquent that we heard someone say in a speech or presentation, or on YouTube. Maybe it was in a sermon. I'm just saying.

About five years ago, at a meeting in San Francisco, I heard a woman talking about how to help people get a new job. At one point she was talking about interviewing. I do not remember anything she said except for one comment. She said the first fifteen seconds of an interview were the most important. Fifteen seconds. Her point was that when you go into an interview you have to have your elevator speech ready. You have to make your point quickly as when an elevator goes from one floor to the next. You have that much time to get and hold someone's attention and interest.

I thought about the interviews I have had, and thanked God I was given more than fifteen seconds.

What if you had fifteen seconds to describe Christian faith? What if you only had fifteen seconds to describe what you believe is the essence of Christian faith, what it is all about, or why anyone should be interested in Christian faith? There are no doubt a number of things you could say in fifteen seconds. Here is one of them. You could say, "Christian faith reveals that we belong to God and to each other." I timed that and it comes out at four seconds.

Christian faith reveals that we belong to God and to each other.

There are different dimensions of faith, different seasons to faith. There is faith as behaving. At certain times in our lives we are most interested in how we can behave as a Christian. We think about and talk about what we can do as a Christian. There is that old saying, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you.” At some times in our life we want to pile up some evidence we are Christian, and not for our sake, but for the sake of our Lord and the Kingdom of God.

Then there are those times when believing is most important to us. It may be because of a tragedy that hit us, or someone we love. It may be because we are just fed up with so much suffering. Maybe it was a conversation in which someone pressed us about our faith and we just were not able to say what we believe. So we spend some time addressing what we believe. We might well wonder, for instance, do we believe God is in control of life, of all of life, or is God in charge of life? There is a big difference there between being in control and being in charge. What do I believe? Maybe we wonder what our faith teaches us to believe about the right to life of the unborn and the right to safe reproductive health-care for women. What do I believe?

But then there are those times when we are not so focused on behaving or believing. We are focused on something else. Something more like our basic relationship with God and Christ and the Holy Spirit. This is where Christian faith gives us something that is more basic than what we believe, although our beliefs are fed by this experience. There is where Christian faith gives us

something that is more basic than how we behave, although our behavior is shaped by this experience. This is where Christian faith reveals to us that we belong to God.

II

One of the great creeds or confessions of the Church is the Heidelberg Catechism. It begins with the question: “What is your only comfort, in life and in death?” The answer begins with these words, “That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” The Brief Statement of Reformed Faith, approved in 1983, begins with the words “In life and in death we belong to God.”

Where does this come from, this faith that we belong to God? It comes from scripture, all of scripture, Old and New Testament alike. The first eleven chapters of Genesis probe two fundamental questions: why do we not live in natural and uninterrupted harmony with God, and why do we have so much conflict in human life? The answers point to something in us. Something in us rebels against God and something in us sets us at odds with each other.

Then, at Genesis 12:1 a whole new section of the bible begins. It goes from Genesis 12:1 all the way to the end of Revelation. It is the record of God’s determination to reach over the separation and draw us back to God. God calls. God invites, God delivers. God does everything a God could do. God calls through patriarchs and matriarchs, through judges, prophets, priests and kings. God calls through some very flawed individuals, and even the best of those God uses, like David and Peter are deeply flawed. It all reaches its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This remarkable display of God in human form, to make it as easy as possible

for us humans to see God, hear God, get it, that God longs for us.

In Frederick Buechner's book, *A Room Called Remember* he makes this comment about our Old Testament lesson. It is a command. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might". Yet what Buechner pointed out is that this command can become a promise.¹ The more we strive to love God, the more we try to practice loving God, the more it becomes possible that we will end up loving God. We end up loving God because what we discover is that God loves us. As we reach out toward God with reverence and trust, the more likely it is that we will find a God waiting for us, eager for our companionship, and loving us in response.

One of the ways we do that is when we come to worship. We enter a beloved place like this and see familiar faces. It is good to be in this place and with these people. But that is not worship. Worship is when we bring ourselves and place them not just in the pew but in God's care. We are not to try and leave our lives behind when we enter here. We are not to try and outrun our worries as we come here. What is remarkable about worship is that we are to come as we are. We are to bring ourselves, all of our selves and ask God to hold on to all of it and to us while we are here. We are to bring the bright shiny pieces of ourselves and the dented, rusting, dusty pieces of ourselves. We are to bring what we are proud of and what we are ashamed of. We are to bring what gives us hope about ourselves and what

¹ Buechner, Frederick, *A Room Called Remember*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA), p. 36

scares us about ourselves. We are to bring it all and place it in God's house and in God's care.

When we do that, when we practice that, worship can become not just something we do but where we belong.

Prayer leads us to the same discovery. When I was in seminary, we had a speech professor who stressed and stressed that we needed to use our own voice in leading worship. He had a number of fake voices he would imitate for us, or identify if we started to use them. The one I remember is what he called "The Stain Glass Voice." It goes something like this: "*O Almighty and Everlasting God.....*" Use your own voice, he told us. Prayer is best when you use your own voice. Prayer is time for you to tell your story. Do not rush. Take your time. Imagine you are in the presence of someone who loves you dearly. God knows all about you. God knows what you have to say before you say it. God even knows what you cannot yet know how to say. Yet God rejoices when you and I choose to speak to God, to open our lives toward God. When we do this prayer can become not something we do, but where we belong.

Augustine in one of his prayers put it simply when he taught us to pray, "Thou madest me for thyself, and my heart is restless until it rests in Thee."

We belong to God.

Yet that is not the only belonging we discover in Christian faith.

III

One day, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, a lawyer who was a Pharisee, asks Jesus the question, "Teacher,

which commandment in the law is the greatest?” It was a trick question. Jesus answers with what we know call The Great Commandment. He cites the commandment from Deuteronomy, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Then he adds a second part which comes from Leviticus, “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Then, for emphasis, Jesus says, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” These two are primary. All the others are secondary. What is the core of what God wants from us? We are to love God and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

This is what the Ten Commandments tell us. The first four are about loving God. The next six are about loving our neighbor. The first four tell us something about what it looks like to practice loving God. The next six tell us something about what it looks like to practice loving our neighbor. Even the famous passage from Micah which has the question: “And what does the Lord require of you?” The answer is “..to do justice and love kindness” this is what we are to bring to those to whom we belong, and “to walk humbly with your God” that is how you walk and listen to and what you receive from the Lord to whom you belong.

The world, of course, offers a harsh rebuke to the revealed faith that we belong to each other. Yesterday Gini and I were visiting a couple from this church. We were in a nice small social room. Right behind the people we were with was a flat screen television. It was on but the sound was off. It kept showing those horrific images of a man in black and a man in orange in the desert. The man in black is about to behead the man in orange. Wise and thoughtful people are beginning to say that just now there seems to be an extraordinary amount of brutality and savagery, of wars

and conflicts. None of this is new, but it seems to be happening on a scale the world has not seen for a very long time.

Now and then there are times when we seem to realize how we could live together. Often it happens after a storm or some other natural disaster. A storm comes through and houses, churches, synagogues, businesses, and schools are damaged or destroyed. After the storm passes, people come out of wherever they sought shelter or return from wherever it was they fled before the storm hit. They wander around. They go through the debris. Then they do the most natural thing: they go to each other, they hug each other, and they cry together. We have all seen this. It is as though they realize this is how it is supposed to be, this is how we are to live together. We do belong to each other. This too is part of our nature, this too is part of how we can behave. But then, time passes, repairs progress, and the old separations and segregations reappear.

Recently, there was a cover on *The New Yorker* magazine. It showed a group of children on a school stage performing in some way. In the audience were all the parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, siblings, and friends who usually gather for such occasions. We have all been there. On this cover, the parents were taking pictures of their children on their smart phones and tablets. No one, however, was taking a picture of the whole group of children. Everyone was focused on their own child.² It was a reminder of how frequently we only focus on the people who are most important to us. It is hard sometimes to see beyond our own family, our own frame of reference.

² “The New Yorker,” January 6, 2014

When Christian faith reveals that we belong to each other, it challenges our moral imagination. It challenges our willingness to take others as our neighbor.

Christian faith expands our moral imagination. There is a story told by Lawrence Kushner in his book, *Invisible Lines of Connection*.³ It is set in Nazi Germany. A bus is going through Berlin. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the bus stopped. SS Storm troopers got on the bus and start to check identification papers. Jews were being told to get off the bus and get into a truck parked nearby. The Jewish woman, in the back, was terrified. She started to tremble and tears fell down her cheek. The man sitting next to her asked her what was wrong. She told him, under her breath, she was Jewish. When one of the SS troopers got close to them, the man started to yell at her. He cursed her. One of the soldiers asked the man what was the yelling all about. The man said, "My wife has forgotten her papers again! I'm so fed up. She always does this!" The troopers laughed and moved on. As soon as she could the woman left the bus. She never knew the name of the man who saved her.

We belong to each other. Christian faith expands our moral imagination.

The truth that we belong to each other not only expands our personal morality, it expands our political or social morality. The moral imagination of Christian faith will often challenge the moral imagination we get from our political party, our preferred political ideology, our social group or class.

³ Kushner, Lawrence, *Invisible Lines of Connection*, (Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 1996), p.81-82.

As I listen to the voices in the debate about what to do with the children coming here from South and Central America, I cannot believe some of the things I am hearing. I wonder whatever happened to these gallant words: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Those words are not a platform for immigration. That is a complicated issue. We all know that. Yet those words are part of our national creed. They call us toward being generous and just. I fear sometimes the country I grew up in and love is being hijacked by people whose moral imagination is collapsing.

There was a picture in the paper the other day from Ferguson, Missouri. It showed three African-American young adults. Something told me to keep looking at the picture and keep looking. Their names were Zhion Jones, Tiara Lewis, and Out Hea. I had to admit I knew very little about these people and their world. I do not think most of us do. There is a great deal of unrest in our country about the size of the federal government. It is understandable. Our own revolution was a rejection of overbearing authority. Yet I think if you listen carefully to some of the advocates of smaller government what they really seem to be saying is that we should do less for the poor: the working poor, the disabled poor, and all the poor, because they are lazy, they do not have good values, they are just not like the rest of us.

Moral imagination.

It is certainly true that living out the political and social implications of belonging to each other is not easy. It is certainly true that it is easy to be discouraged. Sometimes it is helpful to remember something said by Bonaro Overstreet:

You say the little efforts that I make will do
no good,
They will never prevail to tip the hovering
scale
Where justice hangs in the balance.

I don't think I ever thought they would,
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
In favor of my right to choose which side
Shall feel the stubborn ounces of my
weight.

Each one of us has our own few ounces. We can
choose where to place them on the hovering scale of justice.
We can choose how stubborn we will be.

IV

The primary symbol of the Christian faith is the cross. The vertical line can remind us that we belong to God. The horizontal line can remind us that we belong to each other. Right at their intersection is the sweet spot. It is where we belong, where our life belongs. It where we practice belonging to God and belonging to each other.



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