

Sermon Trinity 2016 Belonging

Ephesians 2:11-18 Julian Templeton

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I've never felt so lonely as when I've been in a room full of people, all of whom were talking to each other but none were talking to me. Have you had a similar experience?

Loneliness is most apparent in cities. This seems odd when you consider that cities are full of people. But it is because cities are full of people that loneliness is so apparent, because what one often lacks amidst the throng of people is a *personal relationship* with some of them. Loneliness is not so prevalent in rural communities because there are fewer people, and because there are fewer people it is easier for rural dwellers to get to know their neighbours and newcomers to the community.

My mother, who has lived all her life in a rural community in New Zealand, when she comes to London shocks complete strangers on the tube by starting conversations with them! She operates on the assumption that should be friendly to strangers; and, amazingly, even on the tube, strangers are often willing to converse with her. Mum has a way of putting others at their ease, of establishing, even in a fleeting encounter, a sense of connection and belonging.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the belief that there is 'belonging' in the very being of God – mutual belonging and mutual loving. God is Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is Triune: three-in-one. There aren't three parts to God; God is a single communion of love. God, who is complete, determined in grace and love to create something out of nothing. Creation is not part of God; Creation is different, new and contingent. The decision to create brings about a change in God's situation. The God who was the totality of all that is, creates something other than him that exists alongside him. In continuity with this event of pure grace, God enters into the midst of this created order. God makes a covenant relationship with Israel in promise and Law, and renews and reshapes that same covenant in the person of Jesus Christ. God does this in order that human creatures can share in the relationship of mutual belonging that has existed 'from before all worlds': the belonging of the Father with the Son and the Spirit.¹ The Apostle Paul puts it this way: "You belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God."²

How might creatures share in the belonging of the Creator who is Father, Son and Spirit? We share in God's belonging through the access that the Son,

¹ See Alan Torrance, 'The Gospel's Vision of Belonging'. Lecture delivered to the Synod of Otago and Southland, Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, April 2016

² 1 Corinthians 3:23

incarnate in Jesus Christ, gives us. As the author of the Letter to the Ephesians writes: “Through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (2:18). We have access through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit to God the Father. In other words, the very heart of why we call the gospel ‘good news’ is because it provides the belonging for which we yearn. The belonging we find with God is, however, not individualistic. It’s not ‘me and God’ or even ‘me and Jesus’. How could it be individualistic when its source is in the God who is three-in-one? The belonging is *corporate*; it is belonging in the Body of Christ, the Church.

The ‘we both’ in the Letter to the Ephesians refers to Gentiles and Jews. Hitherto Gentiles and Jews were two separate and irreconcilable peoples. Jews were forbidden to intermarry with Gentiles, and had to purify themselves from Gentile contamination before they could pray or worship. Gentiles regarded Jewish separateness with suspicion, and this could so easily, and often did, tumble over into anti-Semitism. All the more miraculous, then, that both Jews and Gentiles found themselves worshipping together through their new-found Christian faith in Ephesus and other places. Two previously alienated peoples were brought together as fellow Christians in churches. They were brought together because they discovered that they both had access to God the Father through

Christ his Son, in one Holy Spirit. It is difficult for us to think ourselves back into the situation of those first Christians. A contemporary parallel would be if Jews and Christians today discovered some common ‘access’ that drew them to worship together. The word ‘access’ has a densely textured background in the Bible. In the Old Testament it refers to being granted access to worship God by first having your sin atoned-for. In the New Testament many of the writers express in different ways the belief that Jesus’s representative life, death, resurrection, and ascension provides humanity with access to God. In particular, Jesus offered up himself to die on the cross; and because of who Jesus is, both Son of God and Son of Man, the sin that separates us from God and one another is removed and atoned-for.³

Both Matthew and Luke employ visual language to express this same reality when they write that at the moment of Jesus’s death, the veil of the temple was torn in two. The way to God, to the holy of holies, is opened up. The Apostle Paul was one of the first to realise that this new means of access is available to *all*, both Jews and Gentiles: ‘We both have access to the Father in one Spirit.’ What those hitherto estranged Gentiles and Jews discovered when they became Christians is that by trusting in Jesus Christ they

³ See Colin Gunton ‘The Triune God’ pp. 55-60 in *Theology through Preaching*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001

found a new form of belonging to one another in the Church. We might say that they discovered *who* they were in Jesus Christ, and *whose* they were; they discovered that they *belonged to God*.

God is never lonely because he is the communion of three-in-one. We are lonely sometimes because we are distinct persons: this is part of the human condition. But we are never completely alone. Wherever we are, whatever we feel, 'through Jesus Christ we have access in one Spirit to the Father.' Moreover, Christians are never completely alone because we share in the mutual belonging of one person with another that is the communion of the Church. For us, God is not an impersonal 'he' or 'it'; God is 'you'. St Augustine begins his *Confessions* with the prayer: "Lord, *you* have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in *you*." Praying to God our heavenly Father as 'you' helps to lessen our loneliness, because this is the God who regards each of us as 'you': "I have redeemed *you*, I have called *you* by name, *you* are mine."⁴ "I will never leave *you* nor forsake *you*."⁵

Our mission as the Church is to remind people *who* they are in Jesus Christ and *whose* they are: they belong to God, who, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

loves each person. Our mission as the Church, which is a group of people who belong to one another in Christ, is to be a welcoming people communicating a message of unconditional belonging. It doesn't matter what you look like or how you feel about yourself; you can belong here.

One thing this congregation is good at is that when a first-time visitor comes to our worship or gathering, he or she will not be ignored; something that cannot be said of all churches. A first-time visitor here will be spoken to and made to feel welcome in a way that is friendly without being intrusive. Having post-worship refreshments in the Lounge is a natural way of enabling communication and fellowship. If that visitor returns, he or she will be remembered. Gradually friendships will be made and soon the person will feel that he or she belongs here. One can then build on that sense of social belonging by emphasising belonging to God by trust in Jesus Christ. For all of us, *belonging comes before believing*. We first belonged to a believing family, or we met believing friends, or we became part of a church, before we believed. Will you help someone else to belong to this church? If you will, you can help other people to realise both *who* they are in Christ and *whose* they are: they and we belong to God.

⁴ Isaiah 43:1

⁵ Hebrews 13:5