

"BELONG IS A BEAUTIFUL WORD"

Preached by Douglas Norris in the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto, CA
October 23, 1983

Deuteronomy 10:12-22
Luke 18:9-14

Belong is a beautiful word. When you hear the word "belong", what do you image? I think of an anchor. To belong is to have cast an anchor deep to keep the boat from drifting. A gospel song I remember from my youth is "Will your anchor hold in the storms of life?" Can you picture a storm with you secure, hanging on to your anchor? In those days I was a Minnesotan, and the storm that terrified us even more than a blizzard is the tornado. I remember visiting towns and farms after a tornado and seeing wholesale devastation - trees uprooted, barns and houses flattened and a lingering smell of sulphur. One of our Modesto members showed me an article from a newspaper describing how his Grandmother, at the age of seven months, was lifted by a tornado and gently dropped on a haystack. To belong, to be secure, is to have an anchor planted firmly in the earth to hold you steady when the winds blow, when the tornado attacks.

That image is comforting until you move to California and experience your first earthquake. Even though it was mild, I discovered that an anchor planted in the earth is not enough security in an earthquake, for even the earth is in a state of flux and movement. When everything in one's life is in transition - as is so often the case these days with illness, marital difficulties, divorce, losing a job, job insecurity, mental anguish - what is steady? To what can you belong?

A young girl returned to her neighborhood one Sunday after worship to tell her friends that she had been baptized. The frontier children had never heard of baptism, "What is baptism?" She replied, "Baptism is when the minister puts water on your head." "What for?" they wanted to know. She thought for a while and then said, "At roundup time, they catch calves, put a hot iron to their bodies, and make a mark." "Sure," the children replied, "That's a brand and that's how people can tell which cow belongs to which rancher." "That's right," said the girl, "and that is baptism. The minister made a mark on my head with water and that tells everyone that I belong to Jesus."

The basis of the gospel is that we belong to God through the covenant. God made a covenant with the Hebrew people through Abraham, and God made a covenant with the church through Jesus Christ. God made a covenant: that he will be our God and we will be his people.

The covenantal relationship makes sense out of life. It gives an order, a priority system, an understanding of what life is all about. The covenantal relationship provides security and a sense of belonging. The covenantal relationship essentially is, "I shall be your God, and you shall be my people." God has called a people to save this world - to confront it with his word, to bring justice, peace, love and salvation to every person, to bring order out of chaos. To belong to God in covenant is to come out of the chaos, set an anchor firmly in Jesus Christ, let the storms blow, the earth quake, and hold steady in Christ. God has called a people to be part of the solution, not the problem. We hold the solution in our tradition and in the Word. We hold each other accountable to that solution. We sustain and anchor one another. I experience that fellowship in this church. The Fullers and the Norrises are going through anxious times as we try to sell houses, move to Palo Alto completely and get settled here. I appreciate so much the caring support from you that we are receiving. So many of you inquire. So many of you are praying. So many of you reach out. That is the church. We have the Word. Our people are engaged in mission and the church is the oasis, the refueling station, that nurtures us and supports us.

That is the ideal church. Now how do we create and sustain it? How do we create such a covenant?

The covenantal relationship begins with God. Our lesson from Deuteronomy this morning stated that God is sovereign. The author of Deuteronomy wrote of the majesty, the splendor of God. God is the creator. The earth belongs to God, even the highest heavens belong to God. The Bible people may have had no idea of the extent of the heavens - the universe, but when they looked at the sky - the sun, moon and stars - they experienced a sense of wonder that we in our sophistication miss. They gasped in wonder. The One who made it all is the almighty, majestic, all-powerful God. The Creator God is supreme over all other gods and other powers, wrote the author. No home-made, hand-made god can hold a candle to the One who created it all.

This God - the Creator God who made it all - is also moral and ethical. Other gods of other peoples were often extensions of people. They played tricks on people, they engaged in questionable conduct with other gods and with mortals, they were easily manipulated by humans; but the Hebrews were called by a God of high ethical standards, a holy God. This is evidenced in the Ten Commandments and in this Deuteronomy passage where the author stated that God does not show partiality, does not accept bribes, sees to it that widows and orphans are treated fairly, and loves foreigners. The Hebrews knew what it was to be a foreigner. They remembered the Egypt days, and knew that God loves foreigners and refugees because they were once foreigners and refugees.

It is this God, supreme and ethical, who loved their ancestors and chose them to be his people. This love by God is not a love easily given, for the people have been disloyal, fickle, disobedient and lazy. For God to love us, a great deal is demanded. At Pastors' School two weeks ago, Dr. James Logan, theology professor at Wesley Seminary, accused the United Methodist Church of treating the gospel too lightly. He said, "Baptism has become merely a dedication of the baby, and Communion has become an audio-visual in too many of our churches." For you to belong to Jesus, for God to act on our behalf, for God to reach out in covenant, cost Jesus his life, his blood. Not cheap grace, but costly grace, given and broken in love.

It is God who takes the initiative and establishes the covenant. God reaches out to you and chooses you. God has chosen you through your baptism; has branded you. You belong to Jesus. God has chosen you. What is your response? What is your part in the covenant?

Jesus told a story, read today in our lesson from Luke, of two men. One was rejected, one was accepted. The one rejected was rejected for two bad attitudes. First, he was self-righteous. He was an example, Jesus said, of "people who are sure of their own goodness," or as one version has it, "people who pride themselves of being virtuous." Can you see the man, head erect, proud neck unbent, as he prays to God and tells God how wonderful he himself is!

Secondly, he was rejected for his attitude towards others, especially the poor tax collector. The proud man was arrogant before God, and intolerant of others. He felt himself so superior. He proudly prayed, "I thank you, God, that I am not like this tax collector here." Mad Magazine defined a super patriot a few years ago. "See the super patriot. Hear him preach how he loves his country. Hear him preach how he hates liberals...and moderates...and intellectuals...and activists...and pacifists...and minority groups...and aliens...and unions...and teenagers...and the very rich...and the very poor...and people with foreign sounding names. Now you know what a Super Patriot is. He's someone who loves his country while hating 93% of the people who live in it." Self-righteousness and intolerance kept the man on the outs with God, said Jesus.

On the other hand, the tax collector was accepted. He was made right with God because he simply prayed, "Oh, God, be merciful to me, a sinner." To belong to Jesus, in a covenantal relationship, means: first, humbly recognize your sin, your emptiness, before the almighty, ethical, loving God.

Secondly, to belong to Jesus, in a covental relationship, means: worship. The author of Deuteronomy wrote, "You have seen with your own eyes the great and astounding things God has done for you." When you see that, when you catch a glimpse of the wonder of God, the majesty, you worship, you praise. We gather weekly to worship, for the heart needs to worship, the head needs to bow in humility and gratitude, the soul needs to be refreshed, and the mind needs to contemplate God. God is worshipped as our part in the covenant. It is a privilege to gather weekly as the people of God to worship. It is a privilege; who would miss??

Thirdly, to belong to Jesus, in a covenantal relationship, means, as Deuteronomy repeatedly stated in our lesson, "Be faithful...obey the commandments... love the foreigner." The ethical dimension, the way we treat others, the way we live our lives, is essential to the covenant. Belonging to Christ means that we live our lives as Christ pleases, and not as we please. How many people have ruined their lives because they were reared by parents who indulged their every whim, who relented rather than disciplined, who let them live and do as they please, rather than holding before them the standards of Jesus Christ. To belong to Jesus means we live as he taught.

Fourthly, and I like this one, to belong to Jesus, in a covenantal relationship, means as the author of Deuteronomy so directly stated, "Stop being stubborn." Get with the program, don't resist, don't hold back, risk, move, let's go.

The covenant is exclusive. You are either in or out. There really is no halfway, you either mean business or you don't. God's claim on your life is total and exclusive. Jesus gave everything for you, and God expects your complete devotion and loyalty. God has chosen you, reached out to you, claimed you as one of his, through your baptism. What is your response?

Belong is a beautiful word; especially when it means you belong to Jesus.

"BELONG IS A
BEAUTIFUL WORD"

DEUTERONOMY 10:12-22
LUKE 18:9-14

DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

OCTOBER 23, 1983