

The Touch of Belonging

Sermon by
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We have been talking a lot about water lately. Baptismal water, that is. We talked about it on the second Sunday of the year when we celebrated Baptism of Our Lord Sunday and renewed our baptismal vows as a congregation. We talked about it again last week when we celebrated baptism for the grandchild of two members of this church. And we talk about it again this Sunday as we celebrate the baptism of David Benjamin Taylor.

It's always a joy to talk about baptism. This is a wonderful act, in which the person is touched by the waters of grace in the name of the Triune God, who is really the One baptizing them. It's a washing of sin, a cleansing, so we try to use plenty of water around here. But there is something else about this sacrament which adds to its wonder and its power.

Baptism is a sacrament of belonging.

In baptism something marvelous happens as we see the water and hear the words. We belong to God. We are connected with God. We are grafted onto the body of Christ, attached in a way that nothing can detach. When the waters of baptism touch us and the name of God claims us and the love of Christ calls us, we belong.

But sometimes that sense of belonging gets blurred by human actions, or the lack thereof. We know that this church, just like any other church, has members who have a firm sense of belonging. They know they are part of the fellowship of the faith in this place, that gives them great joy, and they feel deeply connected. Others also have a sense of belonging, but it's not too different from belonging to the library or Kiwanis.

However, the groups that really worry me are two other ones. These are the groups who do not feel that they belong. One group is mainly long-time members who feel that the church has changed, changed so much that they do not feel a part of it any more. They don't feel like they belong, and if you were to ask them who kicked them out they might not be able to give you an answer. They just know that they do not feel like a part of the church. Sometimes that is because of something someone in the church did or didn't do; and sometimes it is the result of these tempestuous times in which we live. The church universal – of which we are a part - is going through a time of tremendous transition, a time in which anything that is not nailed down is coming loose. It's a time for all kinds of new things in the life of the church, a time which can be very exciting and energizing for some. But it can also be very challenging and frustrating for others. It's a time for the church to labor mightily to gain a new understanding of herself, because the culture we live in has changed so much. That brings a lot of stress with it, and in that stress some people feel that they do not belong.

There is still a fourth group, another section of folks who feel that they do not belong. These are people who have joined the church fairly recently, in the last few years or so, but they still haven't found a home. They feel left out of the decisions. They feel ignored at the coffee hour. They feel the worship services don't have much for them. Others might dismiss their concerns, tell them to get to work somewhere so that they will be involved. As helpful as those comments may attempt to be, they can often come off as dismissing the person and their concerns. Maybe those who feel this way have tried

to be involved but find that every time they volunteer their services they are blocked by some rule or norm, some secret rule of the church only known to some. They don't belong.

This issue of belonging is important to us in the church, because we know how critical it is for us. We are one in Christ, Paul wrote to the Galatians, and we seek to help all who come here to feel that way. But because we are broken and sinful people we know that we don't always get it.

When that happens, it is especially jarring because, ideally, the church is one place where people belong. It is jarring because we live in a world in which there are so many barriers to belonging. People are laid off from their jobs, they feel that they do not belong to their old work place, nor with others who are still employed. People lose a loved one and feel they don't belong when others try to tell them to get over their grief, when all they want to do is cry over their loss. People with HIV or full blown AIDS don't feel that they belong, that they are pariahs in their society. People feel that they don't belong because of their skin color, their language of origin, their socio-economic class, their lack of athletic ability, all kinds of reasons.

With such overwhelming evidences of not belonging it would be easy to dismiss the pain of others. But we have been grafted onto the body of Christ, symbolic of the ultimate in belonging. Because of God's grace, and nothing we have done on our own, we know by faith that we do belong. And we diminish ourselves and others when we put up barriers to that.

In the story we just read out of Mark's Gospel, we hear about Jesus healing a leper. Nothing new here; Jesus did that all the time, right? He healed a lot of people, and then said that his purpose was to go to other villages and preach God's good news. No sooner are the words out of his mouth than this leper comes up to him. This outcast. This person who had a deep sense of not belonging. He comes and almost challenges Jesus – "If you want to, you can make me clean."

But then Mark takes an interesting turn. He writes that Jesus was moved with pity, and yet there is another way of hearing this. Did you note the footnote there? It says that the word could also mean "He was moved with anger." The Greek word here literally means to have one's insides churning. It says that this person's plight moved Jesus in a visceral way.

One way of looking at this was that Jesus was angry because of the interruption. That may sound strange to us; why would you be angry with this poor leper, Jesus? And yet we could understand that feeling if we remember the times in our lives when we were interrupted by people at the most inopportune time. We get frustrated when we have all these interruptions, especially if there is one particular person who seems to always get in our face at the worst possible time. As the story plays out, we can understand that, because Jesus knows that if he touches this leper in order to cleanse him, that act will make Jesus ritually unclean, and he will have to stay out of the villages to which he felt called to go and preach. As it turns out, that is what happened. Jesus can't go into the villages, because not only is he ritually unclean, but it is not a secret. The leper has blown Jesus' cover, telling everyone who it was who made him clean. So rather than Jesus going to people, people have to go out to come to hear and be healed by him. And that is what happens.

But there is another way of understanding Jesus' anger. When Jesus heals the leper, he tells him to go the priest to be examined. That may sound innocent enough, because to be officially recognized as being clean and able to be a part of the community, the leper had to go through the religious officials. But there is something else here. Jesus' anger is not at the man's leprosy, but at the conditions which made this man an outcast. Jesus is angry because this man does not belong. And he is

sending this healed leper to the religious authorities not only to keep everything decently and in order, as we like to say. He is also doing it to get them to recognize his power to heal, and at his power to bring this man back into the community of belonging.

So which is it – is Jesus angry at being interrupted, or angry at the exclusion? Maybe both. Because both are ways in which people do not belong, cast out to the margins and expected to stay there. And that makes Jesus angry. So Jesus reaches out and touches the uncleanness, Jesus reaches out and touches that which is messy, and makes himself messy. In so doing Jesus places himself with those who do not belong. He takes his place with them, because Jesus, from the start, recognizes that if he is going to save these people he has to belong with them.

Tomorrow is President's Day, and since there is no school our YouthNet will be leading a group of us in participating in the Homeless Stand Down in downtown Cleveland. This will be a time for us to see face to face those who do not belong; those who live on the streets, under bridges, and in shelters. Those who smell funny, look like they have been through experiences we cannot imagine, who may not be able to think straight. We are not doing this to make ourselves look good, or because it is cool. We are doing it because the One in whose name we have been baptized reached out and touched those who are messy. If we are going to follow him, we need to do what he did; to touch those who are broken, to those who are messy, to those who do not belong. We reach out to them, whether they are street people or those who are sick or those who have given up on the church. We reach out to touch them, to be with them, to assure them that we all belong in God's loving grace.

This is the kind of thing we do around here, David Benjamin. We who have been grafted onto the body of Christ, we who belong, affirm that we are called to reach out to those who feel that they do not belong. For baptism is God's reminder to us that all belong in grace. All belong in love. All belong because Jesus has touched us. Amen.

Bible Text is Mark 1:40-45

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