

Epiphany 1
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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To Belong

What does it mean to belong?

Many years ago, my parents obtained permission from the local chieftain to set up housekeeping on Indigenous land in order to translate the New Testament into the Tsafiki language. In exchange for this privilege, my father set up a small store where locals could buy things that they otherwise would have to travel a day and a half into town to buy. He began his translation work—but what good is a Bible if people can't read it? These people had a completely oral tradition. As soon as my father had developed a working alphabet, my mother began teaching young people to read and write.

When the local chieftain heard about it, he came storming over to the house. He gave us 24 hours to pack up and leave. There was no way he was going to permit the youth of the community to learn to read and write. As soon as you do that, he argued, you become like the surrounding people, drunks, womanizers and cheats. To learn to read and write was to lose Tsachi culture, and he would not permit it. What does it mean to belong?

My father was, among many things, a skilled negotiator. He gave the chief a few hours to calm down, and then went to see him. He was willing to give up the literacy aspect of their work as long as the translation could continue. We were allowed to stay. With the passage of the years, however, the issue didn't go away. The local surrounding people began using illiteracy against the Tsachi legally and economically.

It became apparent to the tribal leaders that, to defend themselves, they must allow the next generations to become literate. They were too old to learn, they said, but their children and grandchildren could. Now there are university graduates among them. Literacy is widespread. They have worked out a deal by which one can be Tsachi and be literate at the same time. Sometimes what it means to belong has to change.

What does it mean to belong? The same question stood glaringly before Peter in the story leading up to the second lesson for today. Peter is a devout Jew. The Law dictated much of his life, including what he ate. Eating kosher was part of what it meant to be Jewish, and yet he has just had a vision in which a voice from heaven has told him to eat all kinds of unclean things. Apparently eating kosher is not that important to belonging to God.

Now, in obedience to the vision, he finds himself standing in the house of a Gentile military officer. Gentiles did not belong because they weren't Jews. Military officers oversaw the occupation of Judea. They were the imposers of an oppressive and often

cruel political system of domination. Clearly, they did not belong. But here is Peter, standing in the man's living room, under divine instructions to think about him differently. Somehow in God's eyes, he does belong.

We so quickly measure belonging in terms of group affiliations. You're a member or you're not; you fit the criteria or you don't; you're part of the right family, or come from the right place, or belong to the right race, or find a home in the right culture. Everyone else doesn't "belong." Clearly, in God's idea of belonging, these things don't count. Peter had to change the way he thought about belonging.

Belonging with God has to do with something else. In the Gospel lesson for today Jesus comes to John to be baptized. John has been baptizing people for the forgiveness of sins. He borrowed the rite from Jewish rites of initiation of proselytes, non-Jewish people who wanted to join the ranks of Jews. But he begins baptizing Jews. It is a renewal movement. What you promise has to have something to do with how you act. It's a call to get serious about one's Jewish faith.

Along comes Jesus, a practicing Jew. In John's eyes Jesus doesn't need a wake-up call. so John tries to talk him out of it, but he insists. You see, Jesus is taking baptism back to its original meaning—sort of. It had become a sign of inclusion, of belonging to the Jewish community. Now it will be a sign of those who belong to the Jesus community. What is the criteria of that? To hear the heavens open and the voice speak, "You are my beloved child with whom I am well pleased."

We could get moralistic and say that since Jesus hadn't sinned, that God was well pleased. Jesus is clearly good enough, he meets the criteria, so he belongs, but we see from the story of Peter that it doesn't have to do with what we do. It has to do with who we already are.

God says to Jesus what God says to all of us. "You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased." You can be a Gentile. You can even be a Roman military officer. God isn't looking at that stuff. God is looking at the fact that you exist, and speaks to you to get you to turn around. *"Hey! YOU are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased."*

"You are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased."

Can you hear that? Your goodness before God is not earned, it is a gift already given. You do not deserve, you already have. You did not earn, it is a birthright of being created. YOU are God's beloved child, in whom God is well-pleased.

Can you say that? When you have heard it, truly heard it, it becomes a lens through which you begin to see other people. Can you turn to the person beside you and say, "You are God's beloved child in whom God is well pleased?" Can you say it to your

neighbor? Can you say it to your relative whose political position is radically different than your own? Can you say it to the un-homed person outside of Safeway? To those facing the challenges of mental illness? To people in marginalized groups?

Can you do that? If this is what you know about yourself, and if this is how you see others, how will you then live?

What does it mean to belong? It means to join those who have heard those words, “You are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased,” and then turn, speak them in word and deed into the world.