

“Belong, Believe, Bless”: Our Need to Belong

Text: selected

1.21.18



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“Do you remember your first conscious experience of belonging? (e.g. for me, it was my putting on my uniform from the first baseball team for which I played) How did it make you feel?”

“What are some of the organizations/groups/clubs to which you belong? What does belonging to that group mean to you?”

“What are some of the characteristics of healthy belonging? What are some of the reasons we choose not to belong?”

“Who are your people? Who knows your story? Whose stories do you know? To whom do you belong? Who belongs with/to you? Who have you become (are becoming), as a result?”

“Who is the object of my affection? Which way do I seem to be moving? Closer to Jesus? Further away from Jesus? Who is getting the best of me?”

“Which way I am facing? To whom do I offer my allegiance?”

“Are there signs-of-life which indicate that my desires are being transformed? Do I find myself actually doing the things Jesus asks me to do?”

Teaching Notes...

Takeaway from last week...

Our initiation into relationship with Christ meant being incorporated into a community of people who share a common Story, a common passion, a common vision of what life in the Kingdom would look like if it happened right here and right now, and a common mission of reconciling love.

I suggested last week that as we who make claims on Jesus continue to wrestle with our sense of identity and mission (who we are and why we are), it will require:

A people with whom we might **belong**.

A faith in which we might **believe**.

A divine initiative to **bless**, in which we might participate.

Humans long to belong. We are in a perpetual search for connection. So desperate are we for community that, at times, we will even seek out unhealthy connections, rather than risk being alone.

We desire to belong to something bigger than ourselves. We long to experience a life that is beyond the limits of our “Strength Finder” scores. One which is healthier and less self-destructive and cannot be accomplished on our own [You can’t set out to “find yourself” and “ignore me!”]

Belonging happens on a variety of levels, each somehow meaningful to the one desiring to belong. We feel a sense of belonging when we are all wearing the same team jersey; when we are all at Ste. Michelle singing the same “*Earth, Wind, and Fire*”, tunes. We identify with others facing similar life-circumstances and crisis (e.g. chemo partners, AA, grief group). People can feel a sense of belonging to/with you without your awareness

We have some relationships we would identify as ‘naked and unashamed’, where we share the deepest parts of us in appropriate spaces and with safe people.

This has been a generation dealing with ‘abandonment issues’, in a variety of forms: divorce, mental and physical and sexual abuse, bullying, over-exposure to media violence. One author called it a “*PTSD generation*”.

I suppose it’s one of our primal fears: not just being left “by ourselves”, but being left “to ourselves”. At times, we would rather remain alone than risk admitting our need, or anticipate what we believe to be the inevitable rejection.

Not being loved well seems to provoke any number of unhealthy responses in our lives, each out of a legitimate desire to know that we matter and to know that we belong. That’s why Jesus always began, not with our love for him, but with his love for us. “... as *I have loved you...*” (John 13).

I’m assuming that if we functioned out of that same sense of anxiety and fear of being rejected or ‘not belonging’, as we risk relationship with Jesus, we would conclude that he has the same tendencies as my mother or my father or my friend or spouse who chose to no longer be with me.

We would be prone to strict adherence and accommodation, ensuring his favor and maintaining our place with him and not have him reinforce the same message we have heard our entire lives: “You don’t belong! Really? Not even God could love me!?”

When it comes to the consideration of how people belong to/with the church, **(2) of the most common postures are:**

Believing before Belonging (“*Change so that you can belong with us*”)

Belonging before Believing (“*Belong with us so that you can change*”)

Believing before belonging:

We ask people to give assent to a list of God-propositions and practices which they may or may not really trust, but see it as a necessary part of “pledging” into the Christian sorority. Out of a need to protect the integrity of the brand, we end up inspecting people and weighing them down with our demands so that their only recourse is “hypocrisy”.

Belonging before believing:

Belonging actually permits people to experience truth before they are able to articulate/explain it. Jesus would never demand that we make a confession with our mouth that our hearts could not support.

There are those who know a great deal about God, but are moving further away from the center.

“You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.” John 5

Conversely, there are those who know very little about Jesus, but are moving toward him, not out of a fully-formed theology, but out of curiosity, and desperation, and love.

There are **some movements which seem an essential aspect of belonging:**

First, Jesus as the ‘center’ toward which we are moving.

“Follow me”. “I am the way”. “I will be with you”. “I have come”. Not a statement of faith. Not a creed. These are all personal statements which reflect an intensely relational dynamic.

“All who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them.” John 14:23

Second, the anticipation is a change of direction. “Repentance”.

Jesus “reeked of grace”, but it always seemed to result in truth: people being brought to a place where they could honestly assess their situation and be given the opportunity to choose a healthier alternative.

Third, since relationships are never static, neither is our proximity to the center... to Jesus.

None of our relationships are ever really static (motionless). No one drifts into meaningful relationships because our “life-current” always seems to be flowing inward. Therefore, we are always either coming closer or drifting further away from the center.

Jesus’ very message was “inclusive” for all who would believe, and “exclusive”, in that it defined the boundaries of belief.

Jesus was simply making sure that no one who pursued him would be denied accessibility. Far from being narrow or intolerant, Jesus was wonderfully eliminating any obstacles that might keep them from God.

As we identify the ‘center’, the boundaries emerge of necessity. Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom was both welcoming and open “to all who wanted to participate”, but it could not involve, by necessity, those who opposed it.

Or, as Jesus said, *“Every Kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, ...”*
(Matthew 12)

Here’s the genius, I propose, of Christianity:

Instead of insisting that we perform, it begins by conferring value and worth upon us and then simply invites us to live as if it’s true (Ephesians 5:2).

It says that our marred character is never irreversible and that our creative-status (image bearers) is never jeopardized by our righteousness quotient. Things can be valuable and still be misplaced or tarnished.

It puts us into “adoptive families” and declares that we belong and invites us to allow this new God-family to supplant all of the challenges of our family or origin.

The most exclusive beliefs should result in the most loving and welcoming community.

You can be a committed Christian without having to condemn people of other faiths. You can maintain a firm posture on the uniqueness of Jesus without becoming obstinate and ugly. You can make exclusive claims and still be hospitable to those who long to believe. You can be ‘civil’--- showing respect and deference toward people who differ from and disagree with you.