

A Place to Belong

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March 21, 2021. The truth of our identity as children of God is in our very DNA. We humans struggle. But ultimately we don't have to struggle to see Jesus, because he draws us to him.

Readings: [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#), [John 12:20-33](#)

*** Transcript ***

From the time we're born, we human beings long to know who we are and where we belong. When we're infants, those who love and care for us watch and listen for each little gurgle and smile and coo, and they delight as they see our unique personalities emerging. And as we grow, we figure out how we fit in our family, adjusting as younger siblings are born, grandparents or others move in or out, or as family members die. Our families are generally our first place of belonging, and our first place of discovering who we are.

As we grow older, that process continues. We go to school, we make our first friends, maybe find a best friend, another person with whom we fit. We go to college, leaving our families behind, and after a time find our "people." And along with what we learn in the classroom, we learn about ourselves in ways we would never have expected. We begin to find out who we are as adults, and dream of what our lives might be like when we are on our own — where we'll live, what our purpose will be, who we'll spend our time with, who we will be, and where and with whom we'll belong.

We find out at some point along the way that we will never be completely done with this. Divorce, death, loss in abilities or illness, employment transition, even perhaps a pandemic, could lead to a change in our circumstances we didn't anticipate. And we may once again find ourselves wondering who we are and where we belong, long after we thought we had figured that out.

There can be joy and excitement along the way. And the process can also bring loneliness, isolation, confusion, grief, frustration, and a host of other very real human emotions. The truth is, becoming the person God created us to be, and finding our purpose and place of belonging, are not easy — not for us, or for those close to us.

If we have ever struggled with this, or are struggling with it now, we can find a lot of hope in our readings for today. Because one thing that becomes clear as we listen is that God understands our need for belonging, and how easy it is to forget who we are. Jeremiah is bringing God's word to a people who have been exiled, cut off from the place they belonged and from many of those they belonged with. It even felt to them that they had been cut off from God, as they had been driven away from the temple in Jerusalem where they had celebrated all of their holy days, the place they went to be with God.

Perhaps we can understand that better now than ever, when it is almost exactly a year since we celebrated our first Zoom worship. We have, in a very real sense, been living through a time of exile, from our church building and for many of us also from our schools and workplaces, and we've been physically separated from one another in ways we have never experienced before. We have had to do so much rethinking about who we spend our time with, and how. We as a community have had to reimagine what it means to be church, and how to minister together.

I find it really encouraging to know that none of this is new. God knew how hard it was for the Israelites, and through Jeremiah's words, he reminded them of who they were: ones with God's promise written on their hearts. And the same is true for us. Think about that for a moment. God has written God's promise on our hearts. Your council reflected on this at our monthly meeting this last week, and shared what this means for them: forgiveness, as we know God is with us when we make mistakes, guiding us back to the right path, knowing that no matter how hard or confusing things are, God will show us what we need to know. Comfort, in trusting God's presence, even in chaotic or frightening times. And the freedom to be the people God has created us to be. Our identity as beloved of God is coded in our DNA. Nothing can change that. In spite of recent declarations that LGBTQ people are not acceptable as they are, the constant denial of basic human rights and dignity of People of Color, the shootings targeting Asian people in Atlanta that took eight lives this week, the brutal assault on life and freedom of people in Myanmar who are calling for justice, the trauma and exile of pandemic. Despite all of that, God is faithful, and the promise holds. We don't have to struggle and work and study and strive to belong to God. We just belong.

In our gospel from John today, Jesus tells everyone listening just how faithful God is to this promise. John tells us that two Greek people showed up wanting to see Jesus, and in response, Jesus says not only that all people are welcome, but that this is exactly why he came — to draw us all to himself, and to God. Jesus doesn't shy away from the pain and the struggle of that call. He says that his death will lead to the life that is promised, and that it is through being raised on the cross that we will be drawn together. Jesus, in John, knows who he is and what he is here to do, and it is all part of that plan to bring us home.

This world carries so much beauty and promise, and we know this year more than most that there is pain and suffering in this life too. As Mr. Jesse is saying, there are things that are positive and strong and happy and hopeful, and there is struggle and mistakes and pain in this world too. And through all of it, the truth of the cross is clear. As much as we humans may wonder and question and seek, God's promise is coded in our very DNA, so nothing can erase it. No matter what else happens or what changes may come, no matter what challenges or pain we face, through the cross, Jesus calls us all to him. It's what he came to do, and it is where we belong.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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