



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

2nd Sunday After Pentecost

June 18, 2017

“To Belong”

(Psalm 100:3)

Rev. David K. Groth

*Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and
we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his
pasture” (Ps. 100:3)*

COLLECT: Almighty and everlasting God, in the Word of Your apostles and prophets You have proclaimed to us Your saving will. Grant us faith to believe Your promises that we may receive eternal salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

My son Jonathan goes off to college this fall, to UW-Madison. It has me thinking about those first few weeks at the university – all the dumb things we did to try to fit in. Jon has a much better head on his shoulders than I did, and his experiences will be very different. But just thinking about those first weeks makes me anxious for him.

Of course none of us really knew one another. We were thrown in to the dorms helter-skelter. And the first thing we tried to sort out was who were the unofficial leaders of the pack, of the floor, of the dormitory. It seemed those first few weeks it was the knuckleheads who were in charge: those who drank the most, laughed the loudest, the hard charging partiers, they became the leaders mostly by default, simply by being louder and more brash. There wasn't time enough for a more careful sorting. Besides, everyone just wanted to fit in. We all wanted to belong. So, to one degree or another we fell in behind the boozed up, and the boisterous, or as Shakespeare wrote, those who had "not so much brain as earwax" (Troilus and Cressida. Act V. Scene I). But we wanted to belong.

People will do all kinds of crazy things to belong. They will join gangs and cults and even fanatical groups like Isis. We now know that many of those who join Isis don't do it for ideological reasons. Instead many join for a sense of belonging and common purpose. They adopt the extremism *after* they join the group. The good news is "it's not hard to let go of those beliefs because they weren't deeply held in the first place" (Australian Psychological Society). They joined because they want to belong.

Abraham Maslow became famous for showing us that belonging is a human need, not unlike the need for food,

water and shelter. If we don't have a sense of belonging, Maslow taught, we will never achieve our full potential.

Belonging helps us survive! There's strength in numbers. Conversely, research shows that isolation and loneliness harms our sense of well-being. It harms our immune function and our health. We are less able to cope with adversity. If we don't have a sense of belonging, we don't see value in life. It even lowers our IQ. The simple fact is, those who don't belong don't thrive very well.

With this in mind, how wonderful it is to hear these ancient words are from Psalm 100: *“Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”* In short, you belong! We belong to him, and because we belong to him, we belong to each other. Since we pray, “Our Father. . .” that makes us brothers and sisters.

If you go through the trouble of making strawberry jam, it's yours. You made it. In the same way, “It is he who made us, and we are his.” But that's not altogether comforting just yet, because remember, we've rebelled against God. We've sinned against him. And whatever else sin does, it always creates distance and ruins the fellowship.

It creates distance between us and God. Remember how Adam and Eve fled from the Lord in the garden, and tried to hide, and create distance. Remember how Jonah also fled from God and his calling. Remember how the prodigal son in his rebellion ran off to the far country? And in your own life, when you hit that patch of open and rebellious sin, that's precisely when God seemed most distant. But it wasn't God who walked away. In Isaiah 1, the Lord said, “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation . . . they have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged” (v. 4). There's distance.

Sin creates a gap between God and man. Sin also creates distance between one another. Because of sin it's good to create what we call healthy boundaries. And, of

course, that's all very obvious and old, but before sin there was no need for any of that. We can hardly imagine life any other way, but before sin there was perfect communion, perfect fellowship, no need for boundaries or walls or fences.

Whatever else sin does, sin creates distance between one another and destroys the sense of fellowship and of belonging. Families are broken and divided. Cliques and clubs throw up walls and throw out members. Neighborhoods become gated, exclusive. A guest comes and leaves a church without ever being welcomed, or invited to return, and resolves never to return. A sharp word is spoken in the church parking lot, and makes a person feel like quitting.

Whatever else sin does, it always creates distance between God and between one another. And the only one who can fix that is God.

He attacks sin at its root. He comes as one of us, belonging to the whole human race. He made his home on earth so that we could have a home in heaven. To save us from being excluded by our sin, Jesus was numbered with the transgressors. To save us from ultimate forsakenness, he was forsaken. He became the scapegoat so that we could become the sheep. He was estranged from the father so that we could become heirs.

Then he gives us the victory. Through Word and Baptism, the Holy Spirit calls and gathers us into his church, where we belong. Race or skin color or culture, so sinfully important elsewhere for a sense of belonging, for determining who's in and who's out, none of that makes a shred of difference in here, not in God's eyes, and it shouldn't in ours. Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Wealth and affluence, (so sinfully important elsewhere), doesn't make a bit of difference here, or at least it shouldn't. For "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34).

Even sin does not disqualify us. To belong means to be accepted. Think of all those Jesus accepted and loved, in spite of their sin.

Baptism gives us the belonging we most need. “I have called you by name, you are mine” (Is. 43:1). And again from 1 Corinthians 12, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”(v. 13). In that same chapter Paul reminds us that each part of the body belongs. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (vv. 21-22). They belong! You belong!

God’s church on earth is not some sort of ecclesiastical club you choose to join. No, you were gathered into it, by the Holy Spirit working through Word and water. So Peter writes, “You are a *chosen* race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a *people for his own possession*” (1 Pet. 2:9). You belong!

Luther wrote, faith is thicker than blood. “For here we have one Baptism, one Christ, one Sacrament, one food, one Gospel, one faith, one Spirit, one spiritual body; and each is a member of the other. *No other brotherhood is so closely knit.*” (What Luther Wrote, p.275).

Remember that, especially when you feel most isolated and lonely . . . you still belong. “For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone” wrote Paul. “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or die, we *belong* to Lord” (Rom. 14:7-9).

“I am the Good Shepherd” said Jesus. “I know my own, and my own know me . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep.” That’s the very best news of all. But then he shifts his focus and ours from the inside to the outside, to those who do not yet belong. “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also.” That is, right here in Watertown, there’s work to do. The street on which you live, there’s work to do. Probably in the homes on either side of you, there’s work to do. It would be overwhelming were it not for the promise, “They too will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” (Jn. 10).

You belong. You are not alone. You are a member of the Body of Christ, a part communion of saints, among the

people of God. Your name is also written in the Lamb's Book of Life because God decided it belongs there. When God looks at you, he sees a child he made, a child he knows, a child he loves. He sees a sheep of his own fold, a lamb of his own flock, and a sinner of his own redeeming.

You are not alone. You belong. Thanks be to God.
Amen.

