

Easter 5 C May 15, 2022

We each need to belong. How do we find belonging? How to we help others find belonging?

Since we were children, we have understood how important it is to belong. So many of the playground scrabbles had to do with establishing friend groups and of deciding who was in and who was out. When it comes to belonging, the Mayo Clinic writes: “When we feel we have support and are not alone, we are more resilient, often coping more effectively with difficult times in our lives. [While] Depression, anxiety and suicide are common mental health conditions associated with lacking a sense of belonging.”

One of the tensions we can feel when we read the stories in the Bible revolves around the question of belonging—of who’s in and who’s out. We get a hint of this when the three men who are sent to Peter from Caesarea, arrive at the house where he was when the Spirit told him to go with them and not to make a distinction between himself and them. He’s told to accept them as he would accept the members of his own family because he would have been inclined to refuse to have anything to do with them.

In the reading from Acts, it becomes clear that the good news in Jesus Christ isn’t exclusive to the Jewish Christians: it was for the Gentiles, as well. This means that the uncircumcised outsiders are now to be regarded as sisters and brothers in Christ. In the reading from Revelation we hear:

"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;

... And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

And in the Gospel we hear that we are to love one another. Just as Jesus has loved us, we also should love one another. By this everyone will know that we are Jesus' disciples: that we have love for one another.

Last week someone remarked that my sermons are about love. Most preachers only have one sermon that they serve up with different sauce each week. It didn't take long for you to identify my one sermon. My sermons will always be about love because that is what Jesus commands us to do. Jesus says: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." The challenge, then, for us, is to figure out how to put that love into practice. This is where it gets interesting. This is where we must ask: "What is love calling me to do?"

IF we have been baptized, we have promised to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as yourself. We have promised to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. We have promised to live this way with God's help. IT IS A BIG DEAL. We cannot do it of out of our own merit. We can only live in this way if we plug into the grace that God wants to give us in the moment.

As you and I have experienced, we can sometimes get so fired up about an issue, that tuning in to the grace God wants to give in the moment is impossible. When this happens, we need to take a breath—a deep breath, and breathe in the Spirit of peace and love. Having love for one another is challenging: we may have no affinity for some people. Dealing with them in a loving manner is hard. Our diaphragm tightens. Our voices go up. We get anxious if not angry. We harden our positions.

We don't listen. We don't want to hear it. We can't get out of there fast enough.

I'm being mischievous: How would we deal with Putin in a loving manner? I can't condone what he is doing with his army and the way the Kremlin is describing the invasion of Ukraine as a way to protect themselves from the Nazi threat. Calling the Ukrainians Nazis is dehumanizing. It makes them acceptable targets for annihilation. And yet, when we are quick to condemn the Kremlin, let's also remember what The United States did in Iraq and Iran.

In order to deal with Putin in a loving manner we would have to be clear about the power of God's love at work in us and we would have to believe that that same power of love could go to work in him. We would have to imagine what it would be like for God to welcome us, and then we would have to welcome Putin in the same way. This is more than a stretch, yet as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Dehumanization cannot drive out dehumanization. Only love can do that.

When God says that God is making all things new, we can understand that what is new is the power to live according to God's way of loving. Dehumanizing is the opposite of this kind of love. Dehumanizing robs our relationships of empathy.

If you can get people to view a certain class of other people as being less than human, then you can get them to engage in behaviors that they know are wrong. White, male local governments thought it was okay to persecute Black people. Law enforcement stood by while white mobs lynched Black folk.

Any time someone reduces a human being to a single characteristic, especially a negative one, they are dehumanizing. "Alcoholic," "addict," "diabetic," and "schizophrenic" all rob people of the full complexity of

their lives and reduce them to a symptom or disorder. ...All slurs (insults based on race, gender, sexual orientation, health status or other characteristic) are also dehumanizing.

What part does this phenomenon play in our own choices to exclude someone from a group, a committee, or organization? What do we hope to achieve when we don't let someone in? What are we protecting? What benefit are we seeking?

The opposite of dehumanization is empathy and respect, as perhaps best expressed by the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Sherry Hamby writes about some strategies for more empathetic living. I'll quote three of them:

1) Do not use dehumanizing language when you criticize others, including people with loathsome political views or who perpetrate terrible crimes,...and do not call people "monsters" or "Neanderthals" or other terms that suggest they are not human.

2) Use questions or statements to draw out empathic response. ... Most people are capable of empathy. Try statements such as, ... "I try to imagine what it would be like to walk a mile in their shoes," or "I always try to find common ground with others," or "I think we all want the same basic things in life."

First, validate the person (not the attitude or behavior), or, in other words, humanize them. Second, name the issue and express some curiosity about the other person's thinking on the issue. Third, tell a personal story about how you developed your own (loving and respectful) position.

3) Remember that the only true way to raise yourself up is by lifting up others, not running them down. Most people recognize the neediness and insecurity behind negative comments that range from petty to fully dehumanizing. Strong people do not need to “punch down” to feel good about themselves. ...The more authority and power you have, the more care you need to exercise in criticizing others.¹

What God did in Jesus Christ proves that God has decided that we are in. God made God’s home with us human beings. We are in God’s club. We are on God’s committee. We belong to God’s organization. God has chosen us. We belong. We are the targets of God’s love. When we own this as our true identity, we won’t be afraid to welcome others with the same inclusivity.

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