

Seventh Sunday after Easter

May 28, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Luke 1:68-79; Galatians 3: 1-9:23-29

Grace to you and peace from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

The need to belong is as basic a human need as food and shelter. The need for acceptance as a part or a member of a social grouping seems to be coded in our DNA, a part of our very human-ness. We see it in the Biblical beginning, when God looks upon the first human being, Adam, and says, "It is not good for man to be alone." Seeking that acceptance in belonging is a potent motivator that brings people to social groups, fraternal and political organizations, marriage and yes, even church. And if you are not convinced of the importance of our need to belong, just ask any young person trying to survive the social life of middle or high school.... or dig in your own memories of the hurt you felt when excluded from a clique, social circle, office power pack or other special group. The need to belong leads some people to join gangs, cults, terrorist sects and unhealthy relationships.

Many of the groups to which we belong have requirements for acceptance. Some can be as informal as a common interest, shared experience or the same quirky humor. Other groups have specific, written rules for joining and for remaining a member, which can be strictly or loosely enforced. There have been books, plays, movies and songs written about the joys of acceptance and the pain of rejection, the narrowness of some groups and the positive contributions made by others.... and the resulting reactions and consequences that often affect many more than the persons immediately involved. The groups and organizations to which we belong are often the very source of our identity or, at least, can greatly shape who we are. [Sing]:

*"Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name.
Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine."¹*

Pastor and Professor Fred Craddock went back to the Great Smokey Mountains one summer to take a short vacation with his wife, Nettie. One night they found a quiet little restaurant in Gatlinburg with great views. They looked forward to a private meal - just the two of them.

While they were waiting for their meal, they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting guests. He came to their table, "Good evening." "Good evening," Craddock replied

"Where you folks from?" he asked amicably.

"We're from Oklahoma."

"What do you do in Oklahoma?"

Craddock was thinking, "Leave us alone. We're on vacation." But aloud he said, "I am a Christian minister." He said, "What church?" I said, "The Christian Church."

He paused a moment and said, "I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian church," And with that, he pulled up a chair and sat down at the table.

Dr. Craddock said, "Yes, have a seat," trying to make it seem like he sincerely meant it, but he didn't. Who was this guy?"

He said, "I grew up in these mountains. My mother wasn't married when I was born and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child. In those days, that was a shame, and I was ashamed. The reproach that fell on her, of course, fell also on me. When I went into town with her, I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who was my father. At school, the children said ugly things to me, so I stayed to myself during recess, and I ate my lunch alone. "

"In my early teens, I began to attend a little church back in the mountains. It had a minister that was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face and a heavy beard and a deep voice. I went to hear him preach. I don't know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid that I was not welcome since I was, as they put it, a b..... , well you know. So I would go just in time for the sermon and when it was over I would move out because I was afraid that someone would say, 'What's a boy like you doing in a church?'"

"One Sunday some people lined up in the aisle before I could get out, and I was stopped. Before I could make my way through the group, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. It was that minister. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could see mine and seemed to be staring for a little while. I knew what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my father was. A moment later, he said, "Well, boy, you're a child of....' and he paused there. And I knew it was coming. I knew I would have my feelings hurt. I knew I would not go back again. He said, "Boy, you're a child of God. I see a striking resemblance, boy." then he swatted me on the bottom and said, "Now, you go claim your inheritance.' I left the building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life."

Craddock was so moved by his story he had to ask, "What' your name?"

He said, "Ben Hooper."

Craddock vaguely recalled his father talking when he was just a child about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected an illegitimate son their governor, Ben Hooper."²

"Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name.

*Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine."*³

The Christian Church in Galatia was in serious turmoil. They were arguing about who was a "legitimate" follower of Christ. Some said only those who first conformed to Jewish traditions and laws, like circumcision, could be true Christians. This faction insisted that the non-Jewish gentiles had to become a "descendent of Abraham," following all the laws, rituals and codes of Judaism, in order to belong to the new Christian church.

St. Paul wrote the Galatians Christians and us: "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." We place our trust in the same God who promised Abraham, "All the Gentiles will be blessed in you." Whereas once your identity and faithfulness as a descendent of Abraham was expressed in following Jewish laws, now you are children of Abraham by following Jesus. As much as we still need God's guidance for our living, it is not following rules that makes us worthy of God's love and acceptance; it is in Christ Jesus through faith that we are all children of God. We are all members of God's family. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one Christ Jesus." We may be distinctive in our appearance, personalities, talents, temperaments but we all bear a striking family resemblance as children of God. God's love claims each of us. Paul writes, "**You belong to Christ.**" [Sing]

"Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name.

*Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine."*⁵

We belong to Christ. That is who we are and whose we are. You belong. I belong. All belong to God. In Christ, we are one for the sake and salvation of the world. "When you know you belong, you realize that distinctions do not matter -- loving God and loving others is what matters. God calls us to be partners working for a new kind of world, where all people matter.... where all will be secure and not suffer the fear of hunger, disease, oppression, or exclusion, where there will be MORE gentleness, more caring, more sharing, more compassion, ore laughter, where there is peace and life for all." ⁴ And we begin here. Treating everyone here as beloved and belonging. And then we go out there

and do the same, letting others know they belong to an amazing God and we love them, too. That's church. That's us. Helping every man, woman, boy, girl, friend or foe, loveable or despicable hear God sing to him:

"Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name.

Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine."¹⁵

Linda M Alessandri 5/27/17

ENDNOTES

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2. Fred Craddock, Craddock Stories St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001 pp156-157

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4. Alex Evans, "You Belong" preached June 23, 2013 as posted on <http://www.2presrichmond.org/posts/16352>

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