

Called to Belong
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1 Peter 3:8-12

8 Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. 9 Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. 10 For [quoting Psalm 34:12-15...]

“Those who desire life
and desire to see good days,
let them keep their tongues from evil
and their lips from speaking deceit;
11 let them turn away from evil and do good;
let them seek peace and pursue it.
12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.

But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

In her talk, “Rising Strong as Spiritual Practice,” Sociologist and Storyteller Brené Brown explains why she still goes to church.

She began her remarks by offering her working definition of spirituality:

Spirituality:

**Recognizing and celebrating
that we are inextricably connected to one another
by a power greater than all of us,
and that our connection to that power and to one another
is grounded in love and belonging.**

- Brené Brown, “Rising Strong as a Spiritual Practice”

Now that may not sound like a particularly “Christian” definition of spirituality, but Brown – who happens to be an Episcopalian from Houston – came to this definition after reviewing some 200K pieces of data. Even though academics don’t like to talk about spirituality, when she took a step back to see the larger story her data was telling her, she had to conclude that:

- People who live wholeheartedly are also people who have a deep spirituality.
- Such people recognize that we are connected to one another in an unbreakable way, even when we try to break it.
- Shared fear or shared hatred is not spiritual. Love and belonging are. They are irreducible needs every human being has. Apart from love and belonging there is always suffering.

Brown research also supports what we all intuitively know: **We are currently facing a crisis of belonging.**

Social media may make it easier to find and connect with people who think and believe the same things we believe. Instead of this being a source of belonging and connection, much of what we get from our screens is intended to stoke our fears and drive us deeper into our bunkers. “I hate what (or who) you hate” will never provide us with belonging. Neither will clumping together around a shared hobby, sports team, our favorite cause.

A sense of belonging doesn't come from being with people who are exactly like us.

Belonging is found in being accepted among people who AREN'T exactly like us.

Brown disagrees with some of her denomination's official positions. Parts of the worship service bug her; when she and the rest of the congregation read together from the Book of Common Prayer, she will loudly go off-script, replacing parts she disagrees with. And yet she still goes. Why?

Because, she says, *church is the only place where she can pass the peace and share the rail with people she would never spend time with otherwise.*

In a world full of shallow allegiances and rallying around what enrages us, Brown has discovered **What the church has been for two millenia: A place where we work through the messy spirituality of belonging.**

I have a feeling Peter's first audience felt the same way. I'm thinking that they had come to realize that if it weren't for their own personal encounter with Jesus Christ and the gospel, they wouldn't have anything in common or have anything to do with each other.

You know who DOESN'T need to be urged to be united in spirit, tender-hearted and humble? People who have an easy time getting along with each other!

I had a lot of great experiences at summer church camp. For the most part, my friends and I went to camp to get closer to God. (Yes, I was a churchie nerd even when I was a kid.) We had morning, afternoon, and evening sessions of worship and bible study... plus testimonies around the campfire. Practicing Christian community like that – away from home and surrounded by God's beauty – made it easy to feel like I was part of something bigger. In some ways it really did feel like a foretaste of heaven. But then the week would end and we'd have to head back down the mountain, back to “real life.”

I love what Brené Brown is saying because it is so honest and so real life! I also love it because she is describing what it means to make a choice to keep belonging even when that is hard to do.

I am a huge believer in choice. That is, I believe we always have the power to make a choice and must not buy into the lie that we are just victims of other people's choices. Yet, the word *choice* is probably not strong enough here. Brown's resolute commitment to keep passing the peace and sharing the rail embodies the word Peter uses. Peter doesn't call belonging a *choice*. He describes it as a calling.

We are called to belong to each other.

If you decide to re-read Peter's letter from the beginning up to this point, you will see that the calling is an important theme for Peter. In the opening sentence he describes his audience as an "elect" people who are called to be holy (1:15). They have been called out of darkness (2:9), yet must recognize that the unjust suffering they experience is also part of their calling (2:20-21). Here in 3:9, they are called to offering blessings – good, kind and honoring words – in response to evil done to them. They, like those people described by the Psalmist in Psalm 34, will in turn be blessed with an inheritance from God. As they are called to be children of God, they are called to live into that calling just as Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Mt 5:9).

<My experience with call: I realize that for some people, a job is no more and no less a means to make money. Pastors experience calling, and a call is confirmed precisely when it is hard and we think, "I'd rather be somewhere else doing something else. But I know in my gut that this is where I am supposed to be.">

I know when someone is embracing a calling instead of just making a choice:

- When a teacher keeps showing up for her kids even though in spite of low pay, overcrowded classrooms and Covid;
- When a husband embraces the work of caring for his wife long after she has forgotten who he is;
- When a business owner finds a way to keep paying her employees until they can rebuild after the fire;
- When the food pantry staff continue to provide groceries even though the cost of the food and the number of clients have both doubled.

When we embrace our calling to belong to each other and – in turn – to accept that together we belong to the larger world – that's when we live into calling.

You see, what I notice is that Peter has been talking about unjust suffering and evil as things the Christians are experiencing from forces outside the church. And yet in these few verses he is clearly talking about what needs to happen inside the church. So I find myself wondering: When it comes to repaying evil with a blessing, is Peter talking about the evil done to Christians by others, or evil done by Christians to each other... or both?

It seems to me that Peter is trying to say two things at once. First, if we Christians are going to be able to repay evil done to us from others with blessing, then we need to be stick together.

None of us can hope to model Christ this way if we try to do it on our own. Second, we have no hope of being live this way out in the world unless we work out this kind of love together in our Christian community. The image of a team works well here. We can only succeed if we do it together, and that togetherness starts in gym and on the practice field.

What Jesus taught and the whole New Testament reinforces is this:

Called to Belong:

**What the world needs out there
is first practiced and perfected in here.**

The phrase “one another” is the most repeated thing in the New Testament, and the oneanother orientation begins with Jesus’ world-altering manifesto: “The world will know you are my apprentices by the way you love one another” (John 13:35). What we learn to do well in here will find its ultimate expression out there. If we embrace the calling to belong to one another *in here*, we can model the ultimate reality of God’s love *out there*, namely, that separation is an illusion and in Christ all things are held together and made One.

With Christ in mind, we can see and hear Brené Brown’s definition of spirituality more clearly and Christianly, I think:

***Spirituality:
Recognizing and celebrating
that we are inextricably connected to one another
by a power greater than all of us,
and that our connection to that power and to one another
is grounded in love and belonging.***

In being called to belong, we are called to demonstrate the kind of living and belonging that is always true, for everyone, even though the state of the world makes it plain that most people realize it’s there!

Peter describes people who are called to belong to each other as being...

**United in Spirit
Sympathetic
Mutually loving
Tender-hearted
Humble-minded**

United in Spirit – literally “same thinking”

Sympathetic – about to place ourselves in someone else’s shoes

Mutually loving – This is philadelphia, the kind of love typically associated with family, flesh-of-my-flesh, bone-of-my-bone affection

Tender-hearted – The idiom uses the term for intestines, to say we feel compassion deeply

Humble-minded – Living free of the need to be seen as greater than other; able to voluntarily submit in order to be part of something bigger than oneself.

I'm struck by the fact that Peter seems to be touching on what students of the Enneagram call the three Intelligence Centers. We know what we know through our Body Center, our Heart Center, and our Head Center. Peter descriptors touch on all three. Those who embrace the calling to belong also embrace the calling to be integrated people. They are able to connect to God's Presence with their heads, hearts, and bodies. They can do so - not just in their heads or with their emotions – but with the whole of themselves. They are able to fully belong to themselves – to be unified within themselves - even as they experience unity with Body of Christ and, by extension, all of creation.

In other words: This isn't just the stuff of "getting along." This is the stuff of deep healing. This isn't just the stuff of "being nice." Humans who live like this can do good... the kind of good that ends wars, establishes justice, and reverses climate destruction.

To be honest, I preaching to the choir here. Everyone one of you gathered here in this sanctuary or joining us online has chosen to stick with West Valley – with one another – through the leanest of seasons and the hardest of circumstances. You have embraced the calling.

But at a time when Christians are so divided over matters of culture and politics, there is still work to do. Much of the animosity and distrust in our country if Christians enraged at the politics of other Christians. So this week, in addition to saying prayers of gratitude for the ways we at West Valley have learned how to love each other, I also want to challenge you to:

Call

Practice unity of the spirit and humility by praying for Christians who disagree with you on hot button issues.

Let us choose to pass the peace and share the rail with sisters and brothers who don't think like we do and don't vote like we do. Let us continue to speak words of blessing amidst all the words of anger and cynicism. Let us pray, and practice, and through God's grace perfect that love that unites us in Christ.

Amen.