

Belonging

Isaiah 43:1-7; I Corinthians 12:12-14, 27; John 15:4-17

Third Sunday of Easter, (May 8) 2011

Dedication of Clark Perry (Mother's Day)

Kyle Childress

In a 1980 essay called “A Few Words for Motherhood” Wendell Berry and his family are out in the barn helping a mama cow give birth to her calf, which gives him pause to reflect on motherhood in general. Berry says:

*These are bad times for motherhood – a kind of biological drudgery, some say, using up women who could do better things. Thoreau may have been the first to assert that people should not belong to farm animals, but the idea is established doctrine with many farmers – and it has received amendments to the effect that people should not belong to children, or to each other. But we all have to belong to something, if only to the idea that we should not belong to anything. We all have to be used up by something. And though I will never be a mother, I am glad to be used up by motherhood and what it leads to, just as – most of the time – I gladly belong to my wife, my children, and several head of cattle, sheep, horses [and my land]. What better way to be used up? How else to be a farmer? (from *The Gift of Good Land*, p. 197).*

I would add: How else to be to be a parent? How else to be a Christian?
How else to be the church?

Yet, in our contemporary world, it is difficult to belong. We are so busy and on the move, it seems to be better to keep commitments to a minimum. 20% to

30% of all Americans move each year and the average American moves fourteen times over a lifetime. Poet, essayist, and editor of Poetry magazine Christian Wiman remembers that when he was thirty-six years old, he had moved forty times in fifteen years. He said he owned nothing that would not fit easily into his car. When talking about this with some friends, all of whom were in their twenties and thirties, all smart, well-educated and upwardly mobile, they compared notes and realized that between them they had lived in every state and dozens of foreign countries. Not one person lived near where they were born and raised and none of them ever asks anyone else where they're from, "skirting the question as if it were either too intimate or, more likely, too involved to broach."

We are a society that believes in being mobile. Some of this has to do with American individualism and part of it is our national myth of our ancestors coming over from the old country and starting over from scratch, and then repeating that time and time again. Nowadays it has to do with an economy that depends on mobile workers, corporations that demand mobile workers, and education which trains us to be mobile workers – people with no sense of belonging to anyone else but themselves and who can pick up and move whenever the corporation, the job, the career demands it.

To settle, to belong, to make and keep commitments in such a society is often considered a sign of a lack of ambition, a vice to be overcome, or some sort of backwardness, or lack of self-esteem. In American Anglo culture it is rare to hear someone define herself or himself as belonging to someone else. "I am my own person" is our rallying cry and we admire the "self-made man" or "woman."

At the same, we yearn for connection, for relationships and friendships that endure, for roots and a sense of place. In the 80's the popular television show was

Cheers, about friends at a bar “where everyone knows your name.” In the 90’s it was *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, both not so much about friends as much as about family. Perhaps today’s *Glee* or *Modern Family*, are our popular shows about community. Part of the enormous popularity of these programs is that people yearned for those kinds of friendships, to belong to a sense of community like they had on TV. Of course, the irony is that many television watchers knew more about and felt connected to the characters in the shows more than they knew or felt connected to their own neighbors. Rather than visit with a neighbor or colleague, we’d rather go inside, close the door, and sit in our easy chair and watch TV.

Carson McCullers wrote a poignant novel called *The Member of the Wedding* in which the twelve-year old girl Frankie aches with a longing to be part of her brother’s impending marriage. She wants to be part of a larger, more expansive world than her own little realm, and senses that can only come by being joined to something bigger than herself. “You are the we of me,” she says to her brother and fiancée.

Besides marriage, few things like having a baby move us from “me” to “we.” To move us from “I’m my own person,” to “I belong to someone else.” When the baby cries to be fed in the middle of the night, we are reminded in no uncertain terms that we belong to someone else.

It is hard work to belong but for any of us who have committed ourselves to belonging – in marriage, parenting, or perhaps belonging to a place – know that it’s worth it.

Our Scripture lessons this morning are all about belonging. When the people of Israel were at their lowest, distraught, feeling isolated and cut-off in exile in the Empire, God reminds them that they belong. They/we belong to God and

therefore, God will never forget us or give up on us. God created us, formed us, calls us by name, and will bring us through whatever comes.

In John, Jesus tells us to abide, to belong, and that we are called and commanded to love one another. The Apostle Paul, in I Corinthians fleshes out the call of Jesus by reminding us that in our belonging to God in Jesus Christ, we also belong to one another in the body of Christ. We are connected.

The old, old story tells us that God created and we belonged to God, to one another, and to our place. But sin resulted in fragmentation, disintegration, disconnection, and dismemberment – from God, from each other, and from our place. God’s redemption, salvation is that in Christ Jesus we are reconciled. In Christ, the process of belonging and healing for the whole world has begun. In Christ, we belong again as members of the body of Christ called the church. And we mirror that belonging in our commitments we make in baptism, in marriage, in parenting, and in ways we commit to our place.

We don’t belong in general; we belong to specific people, to a specific place, which is part of what makes it hard. We fail each other, we’re imperfect, we mess up, but we also learn to forgive and go at it again. And if we work at it, and if we give each other enough time and forgiveness, we get better at belonging.

Someone asked Eugene Peterson, the nearly 30 year pastor of a small Presbyterian church and also the translator of the version of the Bible called *The Message*, how they could find a church. The person said they couldn’t find one that suited them. Eugene said, “Go to a nearby church, join it, and learn to love it.”

That’s belonging – commit to God, commit to someone, commit to a place, and then learn to love what you’ve committed to.

One of the best and most gentle and moving movies I've seen in awhile is called *Sweet Land*, recommended to us by Denise McDonald. It's the story of a mail-order bride on a Minnesota farm right after the end of World War I. It's a love story but not one we're accustomed to. We usually think that love and marriage go like this: *you marry the one you love*. But in this movie, as in most traditional cultures, *you love the one you marry*.

Belonging is learning to love the one we're married to not who we want to turn them into; learning to love the child we're given; learning to love our neighbor no matter who they are; learning to love our church as it is; learning to love this place, warts and all. Belonging and loving like this takes intention. You have to work at it and submit to it.

There are exceptions – and abuse and infidelity are two big ones. And it also does not mean that we don't change or grow or help each other change and grow. I'm reminded that Henri Nouwen coined the all-important definition of community as “that place where the person you least want to live with always lives.” That's community; that's belonging. Our default position is learning to love who we have, and where we are.

The paradox is that as we learn to belong specifically to each other we'll also learn that our belonging is bigger than we first realized. Instead of “us” versus “them” we learn that the “we of me” includes all kinds of people, even those very different from around the world, and even those considered enemies.

So I want to challenge you. When someone asks you, “Where do you go to church?” Instead of answering, “I go to Austin Heights,” learn to say, “I belong to Austin Heights.” There's a big a difference.

John Courtney Murray, a great theologian from a generation ago, once called the early church, a “conspiracy.” He didn’t mean some sort of sinister behavior. Instead, he was referring to the root meaning of conspiracy – to breathe together. He said the early church breathed together – the Holy Spirit and each other.

We breathe together – different, imperfect, but called by God to belong.

Amen and amen.