

Romans 12:1-18

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev Samantha Evans

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Belonging and Becoming

Let's play a little game of word association. When I say "belonging," what most comes to mind for you?

Home, love, acceptance, inclusion, life, we, all, everyone...

Belonging is one of those words that is hard to define because it's so subjective. It means something different to different people at different times. A place of belonging, is where someone feels comfortable, feels welcome, or feels at home. And that changes as we change. But it's important that we feel a sense of belonging, so we seek out and choose to belong to a variety of clubs and groups.

We belong to country clubs or gyms. We belong to political clubs and political parties. We belong to book clubs, sports teams, and support groups. We go through life, choosing to belong to certain groups and clubs. We don't always feel a strong sense of belonging in those spaces. And even sometimes, we're really not looking for that.

For instance, we may want a gym where we are a faceless, nameless person, assigned a number and ignored while we do our thing. Other times we may want to feel a sense of belonging. This is true for me at this point in my life. I'm a member of the YMCA. And every time I walk up to the building and see their sign about welcoming all people, of all shapes and creeds, it gives me that sense of belonging, and that is important to me.

The point is, we belong to a variety of clubs and groups in the world. Sometimes that comes with a sense of belonging, and other times it doesn't or doesn't need to. As Brené Brown says, though, "belonging is an irreducible need of all people," so no matter who we are, or how many clubs or groups we belong to, if we are to be happy and healthy, then we better at least feel a sense of belonging in at least one of them.

One of the greatest obstacles to this is the fact that there are very few places in our society where unconditional belonging is a fundamental, core value of the group. When I say unconditional belonging, what I mean is that anyone and everyone can both *belong* and feel a sense of belonging, no matter what. No matter what they look like, how they think, who they love, how much money they have, or how able-bodied they are.

What I mean is that you don't have to prove anything or pay anything or show any kind of credential before you can belong AND feel welcome and at home.

I knew a community once that loved to call itself the island of the misfit toys. There was this understanding that they were all a bunch of misfits, who had never quite fit in or belonged anywhere. And because they knew what it felt like to be excluded, to not belong, they became very good at being a place of belonging for people who don't belong anywhere else.

This doesn't mean they did it perfectly all the time, but they a desire to be one, to be a place of belonging for all people, an island of misfit toys, and this desire and stated hope and goal became the central and unifying ideology of the community.

I say that I knew this community once, but the truth is that I've known this community many times over. It's just that only one actually used the phrase, "the island of the misfit toys." I've known so many communities where the desire to be a place of belonging for all is at the very core of the group.

And all of them, that I've known, were formed within the context of a community of faith. All of them were beautiful, inclusive and welcoming places, made up of people trying very hard to be the faithful and connected body of Christ.

AND every last one of them, not matter how good or beautiful or functional, still had a lot work to do to become the place of unconditional belonging they yearned to be.

The thing is that for every group in the world, there is some kind of restriction or prerequisite to belonging. Whether it's a place that is supposed to be exclusive or unconditionally inclusive. Whether it's explicit or implicit, it's there. Even in the church. Even in this church. None of us what that to be true, of course, but it is.

It is unavoidable because we are people very much rooted in the world, affected by the ways of the world. And so even when we're trying our hardest, we still fall short of being a community that offers unconditional, all-encompassing, no holds barred belonging. For any and for all.

No matter how welcoming and affirming and loving we are, there is and will always be work to do to become more and more a place of unconditional belonging for all.

And the grace in all of this, is that we are simply not alone. My most favorite thing about Paul's letters being immortalized in Scripture is that it reveals to us that even the very first church, made up of people who had actually known Jesus, struggled with the very same things we do today.

They too struggled to be a place of unconditional belonging for all. Because from then to today, and as far into the future as we can tell, humans just love to form groups and rules and restrictions for who gets to be in and who must stay out. This is simply the way of the world.

And by a true miracle, Paul becomes enlightened and realizes that there is a different way, a better way. And at the heart of most of his letters is a plea for his readers to not be conformed to the ways of the world but to strive for something better. For something good and acceptable and perfect.

He pleads with his readers, then and now, to live not by the ways of the world, but by the ways of the kingdom of God. Where there are no status symbols to distinguish us. No “norms” to control us. No walls to divide us.

There is only one body, full of a bunch of different members with different interests, different gifts, different needs and different quirks. But one body, completely and beautifully bound together. No matter what.

It’s hard to be that kind of community. It’s hard to hold fast to what is good when there is evil and suffering all around us.

It is hard to keep going, to keep working and hoping, when we’re tired and feeling a bit beat up.

It is hard to give up our resources for others, to extend hospitality to people we don’t know. To engage with people who aren’t like us. And to bless those who have hurt us.

It is hard to be the body of Christ, where all people can belong without prerequisite, and also feel a sense of belonging among people who are very different from them. It is hard. And according to the ways of the world, it is impossible.

And that is why, like Paul, I get up here week after week to plead with you to not buy into the wisdom of the world, to not be conformed to the ways of the world, but to seek to be transformed every single day. So that we can discern the will of God and seek what is good and acceptable and perfect. So that we can be the beautiful, funky, connected body of Christ, where no matter what, anyone and everyone can belong and feel a sense of belonging.

My friends, in this place, we have taken this call to be a place of belonging so very seriously. AND ALSO, we will always be in the process of becoming the perfect body of Christ we are created to be.

I am going to finish by extending two invitations to participate in this work of discerning and becoming.

After worship today, you are all invited to engage in an exercise of dreaming and naming who we are and who we are called to be. In one of my very favorite books, *Community: A Structure of Belonging*, the author, Peter Block asserts that a transformed and transformative community is formed when everyone comes to the table to envision what their community should like AND to make commitments to co-create what they have imagined.

This gives every single member an opportunity to belong and feel a sense of belonging because all become co-creators in a community of centered on belonging.

Block has developed Five Conversations that structure belonging in a community. And so, in small groups, we will work through each of these conversations. This will be a time to reflect and dream, to recommit ourselves, retell our story, remember who we are and seek to discern who we are becoming, as individuals and as a community.

The second is about to happen right now, through the survey found in your bulletin. The Congregational Vitality survey is a tool designed to help congregations explore what is good and right, what we've been called and created to do and be. And it is a tool to then take stock of what we do really well and what we're still working on. So I invite you to take the next 15 or 20 minutes to fill this survey out. Pam is going to play for us while we do this important work.

The Church Universal has been called to be the body of Christ in the world. In any and all churches, we fall short of our call to be a place of unconditional belonging for all people. A faithful church recognizes and accepts this and works day after day to be better, to live in a state of becoming who we are created to be.

So I invite to be co-creators in this community of belonging.

In the name of the Triune God, who Creates, Sustains, and Redeems us all. AMEN.