You Belong Here No Matter What

Several years ago, when I was serving as one of the pastors at Broad Street Ministry in Philadelphia, the staff was going around and around about a new tagline. We wanted to make a new sidewalk sign that would communicate to passersby who we were. And one of my colleagues was throwing out a bunch of ideas and the rest of us kept shutting them down without providing alternatives.

So when day, the sign just showed up, and as my colleague unveiled the slogan he had chosen, we all burst out laughing.

In all caps at the top of the sign it said: YOU BELONG HERE. NO MATTER WHAT.

His intention was to communicate the no holds barred, all belong sentiment of the place. But there was something about the caps and the colors and the overall personality of our beloved colleague, that just made this sign scream belonging against ones will. Like: you belong here, even if you don’t want to. No matter you say or do or want, you just belong. So deal with it.

We teased him relentlessly. But even in our jest, we all knew in our beings, intuitively, that this abrasive, but silly, and simple statement encapsulated who we were and who we yearned to be.

A place of belonging, no matter what. Maybe even sometimes a little bit against our own will, but certainly not against the will of God, the will that leads to goodness and connection and abundant life in community.

I believe very deeply that this is the call of the church: to be a place that extends a silly, maybe a bit in your face, simple invitation of unconditional belonging. No matter who you are, we have made a covenant to make space for you to belong.

Notice, though, that the language of covenant, especially unconditional covenant, does not mean, however, that should you accept the invitation, nothing will be asked of you. Quite the contrary, in fact. If you accept the invitation to belong, then you will be asked to make space for those who come after you. Those who are co-belongers with you now.
In order to be a place of unconditional belonging, all have to commit themselves to making space for one another. And this doesn’t just mean that you can be here with us. It means that you and your gifts, your insights, your wisdom, everything that makes you who you are, becomes part and parcel of who we are.

In this text from the gospel of John, Jesus uses the imagery of a grapevine to explain how the kin-dom, the community of believers, the church can faithfully understand and form itself.

There's a few different garden metaphors here that I know my fellow gardeners will understand...as a burgeoning gardener myself, I can tell you firsthand the deep wisdom that Jesus lays out here when it comes to an actual garden.

Y’all know I have a bunch of 40-foot-tall fruit trees. And as I’ve taken to pruning them, thinning them out, taking off huge limbs, I have found that the more I trim, to my great dismay, the more they flourish. Just kidding...mostly...it’s hard work managing all that fruit!

I digress...the point is that when you thin out a fruit tree, for instance, the sun is able to reach the limbs and fruit that were once buried deep within the canopy. The fruit is more prolific, sweeter, and easier to get.

This makes sense, it tracks with regard to an actual garden. Let’s unpack one more of Jesus’ metaphors.

This is the first year that I am growing my own tomatoes. I have such fond memories of going to my great-grandpa’s house every summer and the first thing he would do is pluck the juiciest, reddest tomato he could find, hand me a salt shaken and watch me delight in eating that tomato like an apple.

I want to have that simple delight and joy again, so I have planted several heirloom tomatoes, which recently started to flower. And I was so, so excited, I FaceTimed my mom so that I could show off everything I was doing, and when she saw my tomato plant and I pointed out my flowers, she said, “Oh no, honey, you need to pluck those off. The plant isn’t big enough yet. All the energy will go to those flowers and not to becoming bigger, stronger, eventually more prolific.”

I had a moment of grief and disappointment, but I trust my mom and I knew immediately that she was right. So I plucked those flowers and kept it movin.

Jesus says, “Every branch that bears fruit [God] prunes to make it bear more fruit.”
Now again, in garden metaphors, this makes perfect sense, right?

But when we try to apply these metaphors to ourselves, or to a community, it gets trickier. We are no longer talking about plants and tried and true farming methods. We are talking about people. We are talking about ourselves. We are talking about real grief, real suffering. And we're talking about doing really hard work. Gardening is hard, but I will take physical strife over mental and psychological and spiritual any day.

At least sore muscles can be helped with heating pads and anti-inflammatory meds. Whereas the inner work, well, you just gotta work through the pain if you want to get to the other side!

So let's go back to the idea of unconditional belonging. And let's think first about those tomato flowers.

Sometimes we get a really big idea that we're really excited about, and we just put our heads down and set out to make it happen. And we don't look up until we've run headfirst into a wall or fallen over a cliff, and now suddenly, we are panicked and trying to figure out where to go from here.

I've learned that I, like many of you I'm sure, have a tendency to fall into this trap. So somewhere along the way, I learned that if I just kept my head up, or even just came up every now and then to survey where I was, I would see that cliff or that wall coming from far away and I could maneuver well before it posed any kind of problem.

But the biggest lesson I learned that in order to avoid that wall or that cliff, I would have to reroute. I would have to reassess. I would have to let go of what I thought the project or program or the journey would look like. And in some cases, I had to let go of things that were really beautiful and promising and exciting, things like those first delicate yellow flowers. I had to let go of those metaphorical branches so that whatever I was working on could grow into something bigger or better or more faithful.

And it can be painful to do this, but it is so necessary and can be so rewarding when you're able to move and pivot in this way.

I started here because it feels like the easier of the two. If we're the branch and we're growing and changing, it's okay to pluck a little bit here and little bit there. We're still flowering and we know that these cuts are gonna lead to even more growth.
But a full-on prune? Cutting away entire branches? Like I said, the garden metaphor makes perfect sense. It’s empirically proven. But when it comes to people, our families, our work places, our church, it’s not so easy.

Let’s go back to the invitation of unconditional belonging, and the covenant God’s invites us into, a covenant which demands that we ensure that those around us and those who come after us can fully belong among us, become a part of us.

Sometimes folx like to talk about Jesus as a peace-loving hippy who just wanted everyone to live and let live. But that is not a faithful reading of the holy Scriptures. Jesus was an agitator. He was a troublemaker, a rabble rouser. He challenged the systems that forced folx to the margins. He pushed and he cleared and he made space for those forgotten peoples right at the center of the community.

And he invites, nay, he demands that we do the same.

Black Theologian James Cone says this: “it seems not only important but necessary to define the Christian community as the community of the oppressed which joins Jesus Christ in his fight for liberation of humankind...”

Thus our “Theology can never be neutral or fail to take sides on issues related to the plight of the oppressed ... [we can] never engage in conversation about the nature of God without confronting those elements of human existence which threaten anyone’s existence as a person.”

In vineyard terms, we can never talk of ourselves as people of God, never separate our call as a community of God, without taking up the cause of the oppressed.

We shall think of that fruit deep within the canopy as those who have been regularly forgotten or discarded, systematically and consistently blocked from receiving the necessary resources to live.

How do you ensure that they survive and thrive? Well, you trim back those who are standing in the way. Those who support unjust laws and policies in society. Those who insist that their own culture is superior to all others. Those who refuse to see the image of God in the faces of people who don’t look like and love like them.

We have a choice as individuals and as a community. In order to fulfill the covenant we have made to one another—a covenant of true belonging—then we must weed

out these attitudes within us which keep us and all God’s people from growing and thriving and becoming a prolific, sweet, fruit-bearing body.

It is not easy, my friends. It requires us to do difficult work, experience side-splitting growth, but ultimately it brings us closer and closer to who we truly are in our deepest beings. Loved and beloved, whole children of God, committed to creating a world where all creatures can thrive and connect, grow abundantly, and live in true peace and connection with all.

In the name of our Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.