

Belonging: A Dwelling Place for God

[Ephesians 2:11-22](#)

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Series: Belonging

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In this season of Easter, we begin a new sermon series on Belonging. This topic is inspired by the work of the unofficial patron saint of First UCC, Brené Brown.

In her book *Braving the Wilderness*, which many of you read together these last few months, Brown writes about what she calls “the quest for true belonging.” She defines belonging as the “innate human desire to be part of something larger than ourselves.”

Belonging is a great Easter theme. One of the great messages of Easter is that the Body of Christ is *alive*. Not alive in the form of a first century Palestinian man named Jesus wandering through deserts and villages and provoking Roman authorities, but alive in *us*, in the churches who gather tens, hundreds, thousands of years later in his name, for the sake of something larger than ourselves, telling his story and embodying God’s Good News as best we are able.

But how do we *do* that, when we are not one person but many, each with our unique gifts and hopes and beliefs and wounds? How do we, as a church, create a sense of belonging that is authentic, given the complexity of our world today, and the intensity of our fears? How do we avoid becoming an echo chamber, while at the same time, remain grounded in the values that make this place this place?

And how do we manage all of this with a certain elephant in the room—or should I say donkey?

A disclaimer: this sermon will not perfectly answer these questions. My hope is to give us some food for thought. And I think Brené Brown can help us. And the Bible too. But first Brené.

I want to share a little bit more about what Brené Brown says about the experience of true belonging. She writes:

“True belonging is not passive. It's not the belonging that comes with just joining a group. It's not fitting in or pretending or selling out because it's safer. It's a practice that requires us to be vulnerable, get uncomfortable, and learn how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are.”

*Learning how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are.*

Elsewhere, she writes, "Belonging is being somewhere where you want to *be*, and they *want* you there. 'Fitting in' is being somewhere where you want to be, but don't care one way or the other 'Belonging' is being accepted for *you*. 'Fitting in' is being accepted for being like everyone else. If I get to be *me*, I belong. If I have to be like *you*, I fit in."

You know who would've really understood this distinction? The ancient church in Ephesus, the very ones to whom the Scripture we heard earlier was directed. Paul—or more likely, someone writing in the style of Paul—wrote this church to help them handle what was becoming a very common challenge for early churches: Followers of Jesus weren't just Jewish, that is, circumcised people. They were also, increasingly, Gentiles, uncircumcised people.

This difference was profound, and had far deeper implications than anatomy. Jews and Gentiles, depending on where they were from, had different diets, different ways of dressing, different languages and customs and mores. I think it's hard for us, as modern people, to grasp how alien Gentiles and Jews found each other.

And all of this begged a really crucial question: in this new religion, this new Body of Christ, could they all worship the God of Israel together? Was there room for *everyone*—including Gentiles—in the ancient and sacred covenant that God had made with Israel, the one that stretched back to Moses and Abraham and Noah?

The letter writer insists, *Yes*. There is room. In Christ, there is more than enough room. "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

I understand this to mean that Jesus lived and died and lived again in an invitational way, in a way that drew the circle wide, while also being clear about what he stood for. We have story after story of Jesus doing, essentially, what Brene Brown talks about, going into the uncomfortable places, being vulnerable, being present with people, all kinds of people, while always staying rooted his relationship with God—even when he found himself in the wilderness, even when he was criticized, betrayed, and subject to violence and the cross.

Brene Brown writes: "True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you are able to share your most authentic self with the world, and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to *change* who you are; it requires you to *be* who you are."

What might it mean to belong to oneself? And how might that notion of ‘belonging to oneself’ help foster us as a church to keep widening the circle of belonging? It would be for us a spiritual practice to learn to share our authentic selves and to trust that those selves will be honored. It is easier said than done.

For one thing, I think there’s a difference between accepting all people and accepting all behaviors. “Open and affirming” does not have to mean “anything goes.” Look at our scripture’s language for today: the letter writer tells us that we are building a household, a dwelling place for God, with Jesus as the cornerstone, and so we must ask ourselves, what would desecrate God’s house?

Violence would desecrate God’s house.

As would abuse.

As would fear of neighbor, including racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and transphobia.

These would be at the top of my list. And as a community, we build these norms and boundaries together, to create a sacred place for God that is also a safe place for all of us.

I’d like to end with a story to help describe what this all could look like in real life, to put some flesh on the bones of these ideas. This story isn’t about our church; but it could be. I have a dear friend who serves as a pastor at a UCC church in Iowa, who recently came out as genderqueer. Some of you might be saying, what does that mean? Well, let me read you an excerpt from the letter this pastor sent to the congregation, and that may help explain.

My friend writes:

“Genderqueer is a word used to encapsulate the experiences of people who do not identify as being men or women, but rather exist outside the usual binaries of gender identity and expression. At the risk of oversimplification, you might think of it like this: a lot of people are either blue or pink. Some people are varying shades of purple in between. But I’m gold. I’ve been gold my entire life. That’s how God created me.

They continue: “What has also become clear, is that for me to be comfortable in who I am, the language I use to describe myself and the language that others use for me needs to shift to be gender neutral. In practical terms, this means that when people use pronouns to refer to me it honors who I am to use a singular they/them/their rather than she/her/hers (or to avoid using pronouns at all). In other parts of speech, it’s respectful to select the gender-neutral equivalent or avoid using gendered language. For instance, Karen now speaks of me as spouse

(rather than wife), and my parents now refer to me as their child (rather than daughter). My five-year-old nephew was tasked with creating an alternative to “aunt.” He decided on “Captain Jack Sparrow.” I love that kid, and that title will be a work in progress, for sure. Friends, I ask that you shift to gender neutral language for me as well. I know this will take some practice and I promise, grace will abound. This is a life-giving change for me.”

What we have here is a perfect example of someone seeking true belonging versus simply fitting in, of a person who is bravely—and vulnerably—stepping out into the wilderness and saying, “This is me.”

From my point of view, my friend has given a gift to their community: the gift of their trust. Trust that the community will rise to the occasion.

Now, some folks in that community—and perhaps some of you too, hearing this story—may be having certain gut reactions. Reactions like,

“But singular they/them pronouns don’t sound grammatically correct to me!”

Or,

“I’ll try but I’ll mess up those pronouns all the time!”

Or,

“I really don’t understand how someone could feel like neither a man nor a woman and it makes me really uncomfortable.”

But here’s the Good News: none of those reactions have to get in our way. None of those reactions have to stop us from trying our best. We don’t have to understand others to believe them when they tell us the truth about themselves. We don’t have to speak the same exact language to share a meal, whether it’s Communion or treats at coffee hour.

What we churches are called to do, however, is to keep at it: to commit to creating space for each other to breathe. That might mean changing how we use language. That might mean challenging the paradigms of how we think, the assumptions we make. It probably involves using our imaginations to envision different ways the world could be.

Really, when you think about it, the early church was one big amazing act of creativity and inclusiveness. No one had ever tried to do what they were doing, these motley crews of Jews and Gentiles scattered around, building beautiful and

new dwelling places for God. I think First UCC is boldly carrying on that legacy; we are doing some new things.

And it is scary, and God knows there is no script; but we have anchors, anchors even more deep and wise than Brené Brown. We have our trust in the One who broke down the walls of separation, and we have each other.

May God bless this dwelling place, and all who belong here. Thanks be to God.

Amen.