

“Belong”

Matthew 12:46-50 | Galatians 6:7-10

American psychologist **Abraham Maslow** formulated a hierarchy of basic human needs that I remember learning in Psych 101 as a college freshman. He suggested that all human beings strive constantly to fulfill certain needs, and we do so in a particularly predictable order. Our most basic needs of course are physical: air, water, food, sleep, etc. When those needs are met, Maslow said humans instinctively and unavoidably seek safety and security—personally speaking, as in health, wealth, employment, and so on. Next on his hierarchy is the need to be loved and to **belong**, the need to associate with others and fit in. **To one degree or another every human being longs to belong—somewhere.** We want to feel a part of something and to feel important to someone.

The need to belong is evident in the first few pages of the Bible. When God created the first man, he allowed that man to become aware of his uniqueness and aloneness and then sedated him and created the first woman. When the man awoke and met the woman do you know what he said? Adam’s first words were not “Hey baby!” or “How do you do?” His first words were *“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”* In other words, he was saying “We have much in common; **we belong together**; we were made for each other!” And just as God lovingly created the first humans to fill each other’s need for belonging, **he also provided the church to meet our need to belong.**

Church can be like many things. Like a store, for instance. A large church in Cincinnati, Ohio, hosts thousands of enthusiastic worshipers in a building that once housed a home improvement store. It might be fun to know if there were any people who walked into the church in its early days expecting to shop for flooring or kitchen cabinets. But many newcomers to churches enter that way, anyway. It’s natural when checking out a church for the first time to approach it like a “shopper” who is looking for a smart purchase. Are the kids’ programs any good? Will I like the music? Will the preacher put me to sleep? Where are the bathrooms? Does this church have a women’s group? A youth ministry? A motorcycle club? Is this church connected to its community?

In this respect, a church *can* be like a store. First impressions are important. Another similarity is that most people like to feel welcome, but don't want to be singled out or embarrassed. As important as these concerns may be, they are not great reasons for choosing a church. There is a fundamental difference between a store and a church: A store wants to keep you coming back as a *customer*, while the purpose of the church is to make you an *owner*—of the church's message and mission.

Church can also be like a hospital. As I said a few weeks ago, there are all kinds of people in the church. Men, women and children; strong, weak, short, tall, round, square, uptight, and many more. Some of the people we meet in church are sweet; some are not so sweet. Some are obviously struggling with addictions or other dysfunctions. Some may be struggling just as much, but not in plain view. Some will be rough around the edges. Some will be just like you and me, like it or not. But one thing you can be sure of: everyone in the church has been stricken with the same disease—sin. Paul the Apostle puts it this way: *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus”* (Romans 3:23).

Craig Barnes, who was pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church at one time, says, “The Reformers claimed that the church would always be a hospital for sinners. This means that we cannot expect its members to be spiritually healthy.” That is, no church is perfect. And no church should try to be perfect because that would mean it would no longer be a hospital for sinners.

So, if you don't have it all together, the church is for you! If you feel wounded, sick, or discouraged, the church is for you. If you struggle with doubts, the church is for you. Basically, if you're a mess, the church is for you. If you're worse than most, or better than most, the church is for you. It's a hospital for sinners, an infirmary for the hurting, and a hospice for the dying. (And by the way, *all* of us are terminal). However, the church is also different from a hospital, in that the “doctors” and “nurses” are also patients; and the patients are called on to play a role in the healing of others. As Paul wrote to the

Corinthians: *“The Father of all compassion and the God of all comfort...comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God”* (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Another thing church can be like is a club. Fifty or more years ago, various clubs and fraternal organizations thrived in this country: Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions, Masons, Elks, Moose, Odd Fellows, Knights of Columbus, Shriners, Daughters of the American Revolution, just to name a few. Such groups provided the opportunity to unite for a common cause and simultaneously enjoy the company of like-minded people.

These days, of course, many associations like those I just listed have shrunk or disappeared entirely. But that’s not because people no longer want to pursue a common purpose and find camaraderie with others of shared interests. It is more likely due to the hectic pace of modern life and perhaps also the rise of our highly individualized lifestyles. But the church survives and still offers the opportunity for people to share a common cause and purposeful living. In that respect, of course, a church can be much like a club, a lodge, or a service organization. It is, however, at its core substantially different.

Clubs and other organizations exist primarily for the benefit of their members. Members pay dues and fees and, in return, receive the benefit and services of the club. Not so with the church. The church does not primarily exist for the benefit of its members, but for the benefit of others—those *outside* the club. The church is the embodiment of Jesus Christ on earth and its mission is to join him in his outreach mission, which he revealed at the beginning of his earthly ministry when he read from Isaiah: *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...”* (Luke 4:18).

At most churches you’ll probably be able to participate in a helpful study on almost any topic that may interest you. But the church is—and always should be—much more than a place to learn. Unlike a school, the church’s product is not information. It is transformation. The purpose of every Bible study, small-group meeting, and Sunday school class in the church is ultimately to show the

way to salvation through faith in Christ and to train us to live in the way of Jesus. Church can be that for all of us. It can be a place of learning and much more. It can be a transforming experience that is life-giving and life changing.

One more metaphor for us to recognize is: **Church can be like a family.** One of the most common figures of speech people use to refer to the church is that of **a family**. Many people, like me, call it a “family of faith” and of course it is. Psalm 68:6 says, “*God places the lonely in families.*” The church has been God’s intended means for doing that for over two millennia. The New Testament refers to the church as “*the family of believers.*” Writing to non-Jewish followers of Jesus in Ephesus, Paul says, “*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household*” (2:19). Yet, there is a key difference between the church and family—a huge difference in fact. Families are closed circles. Membership is limited. You’re either in or you’re out. And, while it’s possible to expand the family by marriage, or birth, it is typically a long process.

Not so with the church. The gospel of Matthew relates an exchange Jesus had during his teaching ministry that we heard a few minutes ago: “*While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ He replied to him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother*” (12:46-50).

To our ears, this may sound like Jesus was rude to his mother and brothers by refusing to see them. It may sound like he was upset by the interruption. Or maybe he was reacting against an apparent request for *special* privileges. Perhaps there was a little power play in their insistence that he listen to them. But that wasn’t really the case. There is no reason to believe that Jesus was annoyed in any way. He was simply using the interruption as an opportunity to teach those around him about the kingdom of God. And what was his main point? Simple. Jesus’ family is an open circle, not a closed one.

The church is a family, but an ever-expanding one. We should never assume that family means only those of us in this room. The church is not exclusive or elite. This family, as Jesus defined it, is always receiving, always accepting, and always growing. As David Kinnaman points out, in his book *You Lost Me*, the church can be more helpful and responsive to people in the twenty-first century by remembering that “The Christian community is one of the few places on earth where those who represent the full scope of human life, literally from cradle to grave, come together with a singular motive and mission. The church is (or should be) a place of racial, gender, socioeconomic, and cultural reconciliation—**because Jesus commanded that our love would be the telltale sign of our belonging to him** (John 13:35)—as well as a community where various age demographics genuinely love each other and work together with unity and respect.

Kinnaman also says, “Younger Christians are living through a stressful period of unprecedented social and technological change, and the longer we take to respond to these changes, the more we allow a disconnection between generations. Ask yourself how available you are to younger Christians. The generation gap is growing, fueled in part by technology. It takes extra effort to be on the same page. Start conversations that lead to reconciliation between age groups and fearless disciples of every generation” (pp. 203-205).

He suggests that we see the church as “a partnership of generations fulfilling God’s purposes for our time.” In other words, a family with a purpose, a cause, and a calling—a family that encompasses every age group and includes, as Jesus says, “*Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven.*” May this be so for us here at Ken Mawr. May we experience the rich intergenerational family of faith that the church is meant to be. And may we fulfill our calling, as the apostle Paul puts it: “*Let us do good to all people, especially to those who **belong** to the family of believers.*” **It’s so good for us to belong!**

Let us now profess *to whom* we belong with *A Brief Statement of Faith* that you will find in today’s worship bulletin. Please stand with me as we say it now...