

## **Homily – Belonging to Jesus**

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Yesterday I got back from a trip up to Washington to be with my daughter and her family. Our grandson Carter is now two and a half years old, and every time I see him it is like meeting someone anew. Carter is growing up fast and changing. During this trip, I was finally allowed into Carter's classroom. I asked Carter to show me his cubby where all his things are kept, and very quickly a little girl ran over to his cubby and showed it to me. The little girl's mother was in the classroom, and she was embarrassed but also proud that her daughter was so quick with the correct answer. And, once again I was reminded how different children, even two-year olds, are from one another. The little girl is rewarded by her family for being quick with the correct answer, while our grandson, Carter, is rewarded for being cute and even brash. And, so that is the behavior we get from each. It is said that personalities are created pretty early in life, and I wonder if what I saw in these two children will still be there when they are twenty or even forty years old. Be that as it may, the family to which we belong shapes us. We shape our children and they shape us. And here is another thing to remember about belonging. We all belong to the family of God. All of us, no matter where we are in our spiritual journeys, belong to God and when we remember this, we are shaped in some pretty incredible ways.

Now, I find today's Gospel reading to be rather harsh, and quite frankly it is at odds with the statement I just made. We all belong to God. Today we heard Jesus say, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish." Jesus rarely gives black and white answers to questions, and he never rejects anyone. But today we hear him saying that some belong to him and others do not. In addition, we heard Jesus make a connection to believing and belonging. What can this mean?

I know a lot of Christians who believe very different things about Jesus. And, for some followers of Jesus proper belief is what makes someone part of the club. But, this makes me squirm, and here is why. You may remember that I attended two seminaries at the same time, an evangelical one and an Episcopal one. Often at the evangelical seminary they would say that good Christians had to believe a certain way, and any deviation was problematic. At the same time the Episcopal seminary would say that good Christian had to believe a certain way, but sometimes what I heard at the Episcopal seminary was the opposite of what was said at the evangelical seminary. How was I to rationalize these opposites? This experience was foundational to my conviction that we all need to figure out what we believe. We

can't have someone else tell us what to believe, even the church. Instead, one of the goals of a spiritual journey is to figure things out. It is to piece things together. There are no shortcuts in which someone just gives us all of the answers. If there are eighty people here today, then there are eighty different sets of beliefs. This doesn't mean that some of us believe correctly and others incorrectly. We just believe differently, and that is OK.

Here is another thing about beliefs. Having the proper set of beliefs does not lead to belonging. At first glance, Jesus' reply in today's Gospel might appear to suggest that belonging to him depends on believing in him. But in fact, what Jesus says is exactly the opposite. Jesus said "you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep." In other words Jesus is saying you struggle to believe because you don't consent to belong. Belief doesn't come first. It can't come first. Belonging does. And that is good news. According to today's text, the proper set of beliefs will not come from a creed, a doctrine, or even a cleverly worded sermon. Don't be shocked. Instead we believe, trust, and know things about Jesus through the our daily lives, and our daily, hourly business of belonging to Jesus' flock. We walk in the footsteps of the Shepherd, live in the company of fellow sheep, and listen in real time for the voice of the one whose classroom is rocky hills, hidden pastures, and deeply shadowed valleys. If we don't follow Jesus through all these ups and downs of life, through places of both tranquility and treachery, trust and doubt, if we don't follow Jesus through all of this then we will never belong to him at all. We belong to Jesus through our lived experiences which then leads to believing the good news of Jesus.

Now, one of the things that I have noticed about Jesus is that he has little interest in beliefs that are based on the intellect. He is interested in beliefs that exceed our intellects, our rationale thinking, or our brainpower. Instead, to believe in the good news of Jesus means to trust, to lean, to depend, to throw our lot in with him. It is an orientation of the heart and gut. Some of you may remember that last year I introduced the three fold way of knowing. We know with our heads or minds. We know with our hearts through connection. And, we know with our bodies or moving centers. Our beliefs about Jesus are shaped through the intersection of our head, heart and body so that they are all aimed at God. Again, we belong to Jesus through our lived experiences which leads to believing the good news of Jesus.

Did you know that belonging is a basic need for all human beings? In the absence of love and belonging there is always suffering. We can't survive without one another. We are a social species. And, true belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can 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. Belonging is being somewhere where you want to be, and

they want you. Conversely, fitting in is being somewhere where you want to be, but they don't care one way or the other. Belonging is being accepted for who you are. 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. Jesus does not call us to a rigid set of cookie cutter beliefs. He calls us to belong in a way that we bring our authentic, beautiful self, just the way we have been created. And in this way belonging to Jesus shapes our lives.

Before I conclude today let me share one more story about belonging. For many centuries Hebrew scholars have created stories to fill in the gaps in what Christians call the Old Testament. The Midrash is a large collection of stories written by Jewish rabbinic sages that are used to teach the meaning of difficult passages and concepts. The Midrash connects and extends different parts of Hebrew scripture. Even though they are not Scripture, the Midrash stories are meant to help people draw closer to God. One of my favorite examples is the story about what happened to Adam and Eve when they were booted from the Garden of Eden. You may recall that Adam and Eve ate from the tree at the center of the garden which had been forbidden. And after eating they were changed for they now saw themselves as separate from God. Their eyes were opened to a split universe of suspicion, subterfuge, doubt, and alienation. Teachers of prayer call this the subject-object split. We no longer know things through being connected to them in affinity and likeness. Instead, we have knowledge through separating and being apart from them. And by extension we separate everything between us and them. And, after Adam and Eve started seeing themselves as apart from God, the sages say they lived in a cave outside the Garden and spent the rest of their lives trying to get back into the Garden. They missed being a part of God and belonging to God. The rest of their life journey was trying to get a renewed sense of belonging.

Now the Fall from the Garden of Eden is not an historic event that happened at one moment in time. Instead it is the plotline of all of our lives. Each and every one of us uses our rational brains to classify and separate things so that we can understand and control. This split is something that begins in all human beings quite early, and for abused or neglected children even earlier. By the age of seven most have "left the garden" and have begun to live largely in their minds, looking over at the garden. When we are young we were still able to exist in unitive consciousness. We see this in babies in their first months of life in which they think they are one with their mother. Curiously our goal in life, and especially of the spiritual journey, is to get back into the Garden and become reunited with God. And, the good news we have from Jesus is that belonging to him and to the family of God is our birthright. Live your life knowing, believing, and trusting that you belong to God.