

Behave, Believe, Belong?
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Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29

The famous comedian, Groucho Marx, was known to say, *"I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member."* Of course, we know he was joking. If there's anything that we hold in common as a human species, it is this: We all have a deep need to belong. It goes all the way back to our infancy.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow placed the need to belong right in the middle of his hierarchy of five basic human needs. He believed that having a sense of belonging (or love) can only be met only after one's physical and safety needs are met. It is only when we know that we belong that we can move towards building self-esteem and reaching self-actualization. The need to belong is rooted deep within us (and yes, even for Groucho Marx).

Foster and adoptive parents learn a lot about how to help a young person in our home feel like they belong. Sometimes, a case worker will suggest we create something together called a life book. Think of it like a robust scrapbook. We work with the child to think back as far as they can and remember their earliest memories. Where did they live? What did they like to do, to eat? Were there any special traditions they observed? If the child has mementos or photos, we incorporate them into the life book. The point, at the end, is to give the child something tangible to describe their unique history, culture and identity. This helps the children in our care know that they belong.

At each stage of our lives we all have some need to belong. Think back to preschool or grade school or middle school or high school or college. Think about the teacher or classmate or teammate who helped you feel like you mattered, and the enormous difference that made for you. Think about the first day at your new job, and the person who welcomed you and made you feel like you belonged there.

And now think about times when you did not have someone like that there for you, when you felt like the outsider, like you didn't fit in, that you were alone. That is a very difficult place to be. Some of you may be there right now.

We know that people will do extraordinary things to feel accepted, to feel like they belong. Although perhaps this trend is on the decline, we've all heard about hazing – making someone who is joining a team or a fraternity do something to prove they belong. Sometimes it can be funny, at other times demeaning and humiliating.

This hunger to belong can rise from deep within, and when it is unfulfilled it can engulf us. Don Henley, the drummer of one of the greatest rock bands of all time, The Eagles, sang in their hit, *Desperado*, "*Your prison is walking through this world all alone*"—or as The Beatles ask in *Eleanor Rigby*: "*All the lonely people—where do they all belong?*"

This week in the United States, Richard Collins III was about to graduate from Bowie State University. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the US Army, airborne certified. He was a beloved son, a cherished friend, and active in his church. But to one racist University of Maryland student, he was just black and that meant that he didn't belong. So he was stabbed by a racist coward in the chest, and lost his life. What a shame and a loss.

This week there was another horrible mass tragedy, this time in Manchester England as fans were leaving an Ariana Grande concert. 22 innocent people were killed and 119 injured, many of them young girls, in cold blood. ISIS has claimed responsibility for this heinous terrorist act, and we pray for the victims.

I wonder, if our drive to belong is powerful enough to cause some people to commit such violence. Who knows how many acts of terror could be avoided if the perpetrators were not hungry to belong to a violent and hate-filled group like ISIS or white supremacist groups like the KKK? I wonder if they looked at their targets and considered, just for a split second, that their victims belonged too? If they believed that they had some value in this world, would they follow through?

Maybe both cases are just a sick interpretation of Islam and Christianity, two religions that are otherwise peaceful, loving and community minded.

People are often willing to pay a high price to feel like they belong— from buying things they cannot afford to risking their reputation or surrendering their morality or doing any number of things they will live to regret.

Jesus came to minister to those who feel like they don't belong.

We see it over and over again in the Scriptures.

Jesus sought and ministered to the leper who had to live outside of town and cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" to those who passed by.

Jesus sought out and ministered to the tax collector, who collected money for the hated Roman authorities and had a reputation for taking advantage of people and lining his pockets with their hard-earned cash.

Jesus sought out and ministered to the woman at the well, who had a scandalous reputation and therefore went alone in the middle of the day instead of the morning and evening like all the other women in town.

Jesus sought out and ministered to the woman caught in adultery, who the religious leaders wanted to stone to death.

Jesus sought out and ministered to the blind man, who for thirty-eight years spent his days begging on the roadside.

Jesus sought out and ministered to the demon-possessed, who were controlled by an evil power beyond themselves.

And it went the other way too:
those who felt like they did not belong sought out Jesus.

A Pharisee with questions sought Jesus at night because he didn't want his fellow Pharisees to know what he was doing.

A woman with a bad reputation sought Jesus and wept at his feet.

A respected man whose daughter had just died sought Jesus because he was desperate for help.

A group of friends sought Jesus and tore a hole in the roof of the house where he was and lowered their paralyzed friend to him.

They sought Jesus because they could sense his compassion, because they could tell that he really cared, because he made them feel perhaps for the first time in their lives like they mattered.

What about you? Maybe around your parents you feel like you belong, or maybe you don't.

Maybe around your spouse you feel like you belong, or maybe you just feel tolerated.

Maybe you're single and have a deep longing in your heart for someone to whom you can belong, or maybe you're divorced and just a bit cynical.

Maybe you're a student who feels completely on the outside at school.

Maybe you're the one kid in the neighborhood who was not invited to the birthday party.

Maybe you wish you were in the “in crowd” because you are so tired of always being on the outside looking in.

One of the most amazing memories that I will take away from being in Jerusalem during Holy week was marching down the Mount of Olives in the Palm Processional in the middle of a multi-ethnic, multi-language, multi-racial crowd. Thousands of us, in a crowd larger than my eyes could take in. Church and civic groups in formation, singing and dancing in so many languages. We all belonged to Christ, regardless of the color of our skin, our particular branch of Christianity, or the language we spoke.

We were all together and the worship was filled with joy. It was the closest thing to heaven on earth I have ever had the pleasure to experience. Until the end, that is, when the Israeli soldiers entered the crowd and began arresting local Christians for carrying small Palestinian flags.

Jesus sought all of us, and the good news is we belong to Him regardless of ethnic background, social status, or gender.

My Palestinian Christian friends cling to that good news.

For them, it’s more than a reminder to be nice to the people we may meet at coffee hour that don’t look like us (*because that’s how many come to interpret this text in the privileged Western church*).

Their deep sense of belonging to Christ is a lifeline that gets them through all kinds of oppression and pain.

When Paul writes “There is neither Jew or Greek” he is writing about people in the early church, some of whom had converted from Judaism and some who had not. He is telling them that each one has value, that there is no distinction between them in God’s eyes. Both belong.

Paul writes, “*There is neither slave nor free*” In the early church in the Roman Empire, wealthy slave-owners worshipped alongside slaves, the vast difference in their social status did not matter. No matter which part of town they live, of the kind of schools their kids attend or what kind of car they drive or what their bumper stickers on the back say. Both belong.

Paul continues, “*There is no longer male and female.*” In many parts of the world and most of the Christian church women are not treated fairly because of their gender. I’ve had conversations with men and women who have left organized religion because they’ve just had enough. Yet both belong.

And it’s still hard to accept.

I've heard it said that there are three key concepts in living together as church: behave, believe, and belong. People think that if they behave the right way and believe the right things, then maybe, just maybe, they can belong.

But the radical, deeply powerful upside-down good news is that God treated us like we belonged before we ever believed and before our behavior ever got better. When we awaken to the reality of THIS Gospel, the reality that we are fully known and loved, our beliefs and behavior tend to be impacted.

But it starts with knowing deep down in our soul that we belong.

So be encouraged today. If in some way or another in your life you feel alone, if there are certain relationships in your life which make you feel tolerated but not loved, if you ever feel like an outsider, if you worry that because of your background or the shade of your skin or size of your wallet or for any other reason that you do not belong, the good news of the gospel is that we most certainly do.

The sign of belonging in this continuously re-created community formed by the risen Christ is the sharing of our stories – working together to heal and to lift up, to console each other in times of grief and celebrate the joy of God's love and faithfulness. Like the Galatians – we are called to move forward in faith.... Trusting in the promise we have inherited from the saints who have gone before us.... The promise that we belong to Christ Jesus. The promise that frees us to reach out in love for the sake of the world. Amen.