

Psalm 23  
John 10:22-30

## Belonging

Stories of belonging...it is amazing and a little overwhelming when one does an internet search to find stories of belonging. It is a huge point of interest for people, from university studies to stories of refugees who have come to Canada, from books to classroom lesson plans. Belonging is a big topic and a big deal. Now that is not really surprising. We have all had times when we longed to belong. At school you may have wanted to belong to a sports team, the student's union, the yearbook or chess club, or be a cheerleader. This would have come, not only in your interest in those things, but also in being with likeminded individuals who could relate to you.

There was also the group of young people that you may have wanted to hang out with, sometimes becoming a part of those groups, sometimes always longing for what would never be. As an adult at work, maybe you wanted or want to belong to a particular part of the organization or profession, doing work that stimulates and brings a sense of adventure and gratification, while working alongside others.

Those who move to a new community or country, even a new apartment or senior's home are often fearful of how they will be received, how they will belong in their new surroundings and setting. And of course, there are our families. We belong to them, but for many it is an unhappy belonging. For others their full sense of who they are comes mainly from their experience of belonging and being loved by their family.

As Christians, we look for community and belonging in the church. Here we know and trust that others are also here to worship, but it is also about being part of a community of faith. A place where we can learn, grow, and believe, without fear of rejection. At least that is what the church is supposed to be, but even the church falls short more often than we care to admit.

The one place that we can fully trust that we belong is in God's hands. We can rest in the knowledge of that understanding, even if it doesn't always fully make sense.

In response to a question posed to Jesus by other Jews, where they asked, "How long will you keep us in suspense? 'If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered, '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.'" (vv24-26)

Now this scripture is not easy to follow. Some background may also be helpful. We are in the season of Easter in the church but this story comes from a time before Jesus' death. Chapter 10 of the Gospel of John is titled, *Jesus the Good Shepherd*. The first

verses of the chapter are familiar to us, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

This whole chapter has been about belonging, and here in the conversation in the portico of Solomon at the temple, a significant time after the first part of this story, Jesus is again in conversation with others about who he is. But they don’t get it. Yes, people are curious, but what do you do with a man that speaks this way? Do you believe him, or think he has a few screws loose? I wouldn’t judge too quickly. Putting yourself in their sandals, at that time, without all the witnesses to the death, resurrection appearances, and more witnesses over centuries of Christians, we too might wonder. In fact, if you don’t question, you are likely not thinking too hard about it.

Being a Christian is not a straightforward, unthinking, unquestioning, way of being in the world. We have the capacity to wonder and be curious. Much of what we know as Christians has come through the words of scripture and trusting that these words have continued to impact lives for over 2000 years because there is power in the promises, witness, and lives lived. There is belonging and trust of Christians that goes back to those first disciples.

Much of what we understand is also about using our gifts of imagination, wonder, and curiosity. The ability to accept and live into the mysteries of faith that are beyond our comprehension, because if God really is God then we should not be able to understand it all. We have to be okay with mystery while still asking questions, seeking knowledge and wisdom.

Now back to the conversation at hand. What does Jesus mean when he says, “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. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”

This whole passage is about how we belong to Jesus and to God. This is not a kind of belonging that is like slave and master, or someone having power over us. And though these are images of people following the shepherd like sheep, it is not because the sheep don’t know any better, it is because there is a relationship of trust. We can trust that in Jesus we are protected and loved, cared for, and searched for when we lose our way. How Jesus cared for those closest to him and those who were in need was how he demonstrated that he and God were one in this sense. Jesus’ character and actions revealed something of God’s character and actions – God’s love for people and creation.

Also remember that stories and images only take us so far. Rich stories can have multiple meanings, and take us to deeper understanding of ourselves and our relationships, but stories rarely offer a full explanation. We are left to discover meaning and purpose in stories that impact how we live in the world and with one another.

In part, at least the part that we might get our minds around, is that when we live in the safety and love of Jesus, we are able to have a relationship with Jesus in which we can trust that we are compassionately and lovingly held in God's hands. We are protected. It also means that we have to experience Jesus.

Theologian Gary Jones writes, "It seems that Jesus' role and identity cannot be reduced to a title; instead, his role and identity must be experienced. This becomes clear in the analogy of the sheep and shepherd. The sheep know and trust the shepherd, not because they have gone through any sort of rational, intellectual discernment, but because they have experienced the shepherd and his 'works.' In the same way, a child knows and trust his or her mother because of experience, not reason, and it is not an accident that Jesus elsewhere says, 'whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'" (Mark 10:15)

No one can convince you to believe in Jesus, in God. It is the experience and the sharing of experience that brings people to trust that we belong, that we are in God's hands.

It is akin to trying to describe your experience of a trip you took or a "mountain top" experience and all that you saw and felt. Until another goes there, they will not fully understand what you have shared, but in sharing, there is a longing to understand, to be able to experience what you have experienced and sometimes someone actually goes where you have been based in your sharing of the stories, emotions, and images.

For our faith it means trusting the stories of others and the lived experience of ourselves and others. God's got you. God's got you in his hands. It doesn't mean that life will be easy or without pain, it doesn't mean that you will fully understand all that you go through, but it does mean that the shepherd will lead you through it. You don't have to go into whatever you face alone, or without hope, wisdom, and love. And through your example of faith just maybe you will bring the love of God, the hope and the promise of abundant life to another. Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ, belonging to Christ. Amen.