

## Belong – John Brittingham

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; I John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Apart from the sweaty nervousness of interacting with those boys and girls who tickle our fancy a bit too much, there is perhaps no more universal feeling for adolescents than that awful longing for a place where we belong. But, for those of us who have no clue whatsoever as to what manner of creature we might be, such belonging can be rather difficult to find and those places where we think we belong can be fickle at best. There are, perhaps, failed attempts to become something of a theater kid—I myself dabbled in becoming one of these junior thespians for about a day until I realized that, when I informed my potential comrades that Hamlet, interestingly enough, is the name of a small village and that, believe it or not, Hamlet is probably derived from Shakespeare's son Hamnet who had died or something, they absolutely did not care. Or, perhaps, one could attempt to become a member of the AV Club or IT Crowd although having more of a propensity for reading comic books and Hardy Boys mysteries and lacking this new fangled thing they called the internets might get in the way of joining those kids who downed blue airheads by the handful and played way too much with the overhead projectors. Or, maybe, just maybe, if one brought one's guitar to school and signed up for "Guitar Club" one could hang out with the other musician kids with their girl-jeans and swooping haircuts. Of course, the fact that I would watch episodes of "Rock n' Roll Jeopardy" on repeat and, as a result, would impose profane amounts of pop culture knowledge on others against their will along with being relatively excited about this shared project called learning might disqualify me from keeping company with those who were more concerned with "being cool" and polishing their bone-white Squire Stratocasters.

In an age before the internet was commonplace, before niches and subcultures became the dominant way we experience culture, there was little one could do but dabble in disparate groups in an attempt to figure out who one was and where one belonged via negative. It might be easier to find one's place these days but I think that it might be easier to slip between these groups whenever things begin to get a little bit tricky. The flakiness of human social interactions is on full display in our connected-culture. We are able to join groups or discussions, say what we want to say, and then skip town before anything gets too out of hand. One merely needs to look at the comments section of any blog-post or article to see just how fleeting human connection is.

And yet, in spite of all of this, I don't think we humans want to be fickle. I think, if we allow ourselves to learn from the lingering desires of adolescence, that what we really want is a place where we can both belong and remain. What we long for is a place where we can abide.

It is magnificently fitting that our Epistolary reading and our Gospel reading are both part of the Johannine corpus and that both link this theme of abiding—of remaining in a place where we belong—with the difficult work of brotherly and sisterly love. (As a sidenote: anytime your namesake gets invoked twice in the lectionary readings is what we might call, and this is a hefty theological term, winning.) This community love can take many forms, be it through the solidarity that arises amongst the downtrodden and angsty protesters who celebrated May Day at the start of this week with marches and protests worldwide or through the legions of Star Wars fans who celebrated “Star Wars Day” by evangelizing with their own liturgical invocation of “May the 4th be with you.” It’s gotta be confusing if you encounter these fans on any other day of the year and they have a lisp. Yet, these communities are not quite as long-lasting as some hope they might be, even though they assuredly experience the kind of persecution that can calcify the sense of belonging-together that fans and protesters witness. These kinds of community speak to specific interests or particular fandoms, but they do not speak to our need to abide in a particular place with a particular people until our return to dust or the Spirit carries us away like Phillip.

Yet, in response to our longing and our waiting and our wasting away Jesus calls to us: “I am the true vine,” He says, “and you are the branches.” Jesus is the true source of belonging and it is from him that our being and our love comes. Bultmann, in his commentary on the Gospel of John says that the kind of abiding that Jesus calls us to is one of an “unconditional decision to base oneself on the act of God at the cost of giving up one’s own ability.” Such persistence in the life of faith—that is, life in and through the risen Lord—is not a being-for God but a being-from God. What is meant by this is that, rather than thinking that we derive our identity from the sorts of things that we stand for or agree with—one might speak of one’s identity by saying that one likes pudding or mashed potatoes or turtles—instead of that, we who are called by God to abide derive our identity from the assurance that we are because we are from God.

Now, you might feel like we’re about to wade into the murky waters of theological metaphysics and such wading might give you the willies—Lord knows it gives me the willies—but this talk of being-for and being-from and adding seemingly unnecessary hyphens into everything is not without merit nor is it beyond our understanding. Like a good Thomist, Jesus guides us to understanding by way of an analogy: “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” Abide in me as I abide in you; remain in me as I remain in you; you belong with me and I belong with you; you belong to this community of those who belong with me and the only way, the only way that you truly belong together—the only way that you are truly the branches of the true vine—is in me. We belong and remain only in and through the love of God that is made manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Apart from that we are little more than some kind of religious hobbyist circle.

There is a tendency that pervades we Westerners to try to make something happen by way of imposing upon it a program or institution or constraint of some kind. To attempt to solve a problem by throwing technology at it. So we say things like “I think that people are lonely.

Really, profoundly lonely. I think I'll make a website where people can always talk to one another and meet new people. Or maybe I'll start a club where members who qualify as sufficiently lonely can get together and discuss their lonesome ways." At root, I think this tendency is one pathologically focused on control. We do the work of organizing people and we do the work of creating programs or websites or clubs or apps or whatever for the purpose of controlling who gets to be a part of the places where we belong. But what our lectionary readings make incredibly clear is that we do not get to do that work. No, we belong together and remain together and love one another because of the love that is God incarnated in Jesus. For those who are terrified of the chaos that can come in communal settings if order is not strongly established, such an admonition by the biblical authors comes to us as something more anxiety-inducing than encouraging. It is difficult, it turns out, to pry free the reigns of control from those so desperate for it. And yet, it was never ours to control in the first place.

When we talk about loving God it is quite tempting to think about it as though our love is capable of reaching God unmediated. As though all that God is (or isn't depending on your metaphysical proclivities) is graspable by the fickle creatures we often act like. Our Epistolary lesson tells us a different story. "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God," the writer tells us. We who love anything are capable of such love only because we are from God. If we do not love, we are not from God. This love of God for us is creative and life-giving. It proclaims, along with our psalm, God's deliverance through Jesus his son to "a people yet unborn." We're not talking about fetuses here, we're talking about ourselves. "God sent his only son into the world," the Epistle writer tells us, "so that we might live through him." We, the community of those who confess to the love of God incarnated in the risen Christ are delivered from our barren and withering ways into new life. We are born anew in the love of God that abides in us and perfects us. It is this love of God at work in us, creating new life through us that transforms us into those whom the Epistle writer calls "beloved." We do not do the work of reaching God with our fickle love. No, it is the love of God that goes before us, that transforms us into living branches of that true vine which gives us the ability to love God and love our brothers and sisters.

The epistle writer does not let us get off the hook so easily. Just because the love of God is what gives us life through Him does not mean that our labors have been rendered naught. In both places where we readers and hearers of the word are called "Beloved" we are admonished to love one another. Indeed, the connection is so strong that we might venture to say that one cannot be called the beloved of God and refuse to love one another. Additionally, the love of God is perfected in us insofar as we love one another. If we were taken to extreme theological visions, we might say that the love of God does not reach perfection, does not become fully realized as the love of God unless it is realized in the brotherly and sisterly love of the Beloved Community.

Perhaps such a position is not so extreme after all. The Beloved Community, without love of one's brothers and sisters, is neither beloved nor a community. It is a fickle group to which only a few belong and only for a short time. One does not abide in the love of God in communities

that are so short-lived and so dependent upon our own desire for belonging. No, the love of God which gives life to the Beloved Community includes any and all who confess that Jesus is the Son of God. It includes the Crouch family of Trinity Broadcasting Network fame nearly all of whom are involved in lawsuits regarding money and property funded by viewer donations. It includes the smelly, sweaty, over-caffinated, rhythm-less youth group kids who roam the Agape fairgrounds like packs of feral dogs. It includes the bookish and be-tweedeed academic who speaks almost insufferably in multisyllabic neologisms. In short, the Beloved Community includes way more of the people you don't like than the people you do. And it also means that you're stuck with them and that that, in the end, is more than okay.

The Beloved Community is not something we do. If it was, then we could hear the words of Psalmist without cringing at their incompleteness: The poor shall eat and be satisfied. Not in our world and more importantly, not by our own hand. Our love is capable of much but it is not capable of bearing the good fruit of the true vine one its own. The Beloved Community, it turns out, is beloved because God's love animates us, perfects us, and abides in us. It is a community because the love of God, the love that remains is never divorced from the love of one's neighbors—even if those neighbors drag race down your shared driveway and nearly kill you every morning, noon, and night.

We are the Beloved Community because we are born of God, born of and alive with the love of God that remains in us as we remain in and with God. We are the Beloved Community because it is in the love of God that we belong to each other as we belong to God.