

# You Belong

## September 11, 2016

### Luke 15:1-10

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We Americans are lonely people. One in five Americans suffers from persistent loneliness. Loneliness is connected with heart disease, depression and suicide. Some research indicates that loneliness may be worse for our health than obesity or air pollution.

**We long to belong.** Our loneliness shows this. Isolation produces physical pain and emotional distress. We are made to be together. **We long to belong.**

As we head toward the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, we will read Luther's *Small Catechism* together. The First Commandment says, "*I am the LORD, your God.*"

This is not a demand. This is not a threat. This is a promise.

Today it is a promise to you. "*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus,*" Luke tells us. Oh, we got trouble, he says. Wait for it. "*And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'*"

Now we got trouble. Jesus embraces outcasts. Jesus loves losers. Jesus dines with the disgusting. They long to belong.

The Greek word Luke uses here for "welcome" means "to embrace." It means to wrap your arms around someone and take them in. It's more than a polite nod as we slide over in the pew. It's more than a general announcement from the front of the church. This welcome is assertive, aggressive, and even urgent.

Lost and lonely people die if they don't belong.

Next, Jesus tells three "lost and found" parables. We get two of them in today's gospel reading. These parables illustrate how Jesus welcomes. Jesus is like a shepherd that searches high and low, over hill and dale, for miles and miles to find that wayward lamb. Jesus is like the woman who turns over the tables, combs through the couch, tips over the tubbies to find that one lost coin.

When the lost is found, it's time to throw a party! It's a party in the very throne room of God. One of God's beloved was lost and is found. One who had wandered away has been brought home. That's reason for the entire cosmos to rejoice!

Those tax collectors and sinners belong to God. They are the lost and lonely. Jesus comes to find them. Paul writes it to Timothy in our second reading. "*The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.*"

Rotten tax collectors belong to God. Paul—chief of sinners—belongs to God. So do I. So do you.

In Romans five, verses six through eleven, Paul describes how God works. "*While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly...While we still were sinners Christ died for*

*us....While we were [God's] enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son...*" That's what God does. And God does it apart from anything we can do ahead of time.

We belong to God. We know that in our baptisms. Next week we celebrate the baptism of Croix William Smith. Listen for these words in that service: "Croix William, child of God, you have sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." We will witness as God claims Croix as God's own. We will witness as God says to Croix William Smith, "You belong to Me."

Since we belong to God, we also belong to one another. That's what it means to be the Church.

I am proud to be part of this congregation. A newcomer arrives for worship. Before that person gets to the usher's stand, someone greets that person. Someone else helps that newcomer find a place to sit. At least three people talk to that person before worship starts. That person gets five invitations to our fellowship time. Half a dozen people point out the new person to me and share some detail they have learned about our guest. Sometimes the newcomer is so engaged in conversation that I don't even get a chance to greet our guest. Emanuel folks, you have the gift of embracing.

Today we remind our young people where they belong. We make good on the promises we made when they were baptized. The baby booties are a reminder that our commitment to our children continues. We have promised to teach our young people the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. We have promised to place in their hands the Holy Scriptures. We do that today.

And then we teach them how to use those gifts. A new confirmation class starts today at 11 a.m. in our upstairs conference room. That class happens on the second Sunday of each month. You are invited to join us at any time for any of those classes. We're studying Luther's *Small Catechism*, and you can be part of the fun!

**We long to belong.** Not belonging will kills us in the end. God claims you in love for life. You belong to God! Let's pray...

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