

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 3/Epiphany 3 Year B 2024

At this early point in the New Year, it might be good for us all to consider our belonging to this place. It might be a worthy exercise to think about how you came to be here, what brought you here? For some I know, it was because you moved into the neighbourhood with your families many decades ago and this was your neighbourhood church. And because you were in the good habit of attending weekly church you simply started coming here. For others, it may have been a personal invitation from someone who was already a member here. For others, you may have been searching for something more intentionally. And you did your research and came here to try it out. For others, it was because you attended another event in this place. A concert, or Open House. For some, it might have been curiosity, a question. *What exactly is going on behind those imposing grey walls?* Others may have stumbled across us quite accidentally, perhaps on the internet or saw us on Facebook. For others, it might have been that you were walking past, saw the door open, heard the choir, and came in. This morning during our refreshments in the hall, rather than talking about the weather or politics or recent COVID experiences, ask each other, *what brought you here?* You might be surprised at the answers. And at least you know something more about the person you are talking to.

It is one thing to 'come and see' as we heard expressed in the gospel last week. It is one thing to take a deep breath and step through the door. It is one thing to accept an invitation to 'come along'. It is one thing to visit, to enquire, and to 'try out', so to speak. But it is quite a different thing to stay. It is quite a different thing to keep coming back. It is quite a different thing to commit to a place, to commit to a church, and to a community. Quite a different thing to *belong* to that community. If you haven't thought about it before, ask yourself, *why do I keep coming back?*

Now we might want to say that here you find a bold and convincing articulation of the gospel. And I hope that's true. We might want to say that here you receive challenging and biblically sound preaching. And again, I hope that in some small measure that might be true. We might want to say that here the worship is carefully and reverently and beautifully celebrated. And I hope that might be true. We might want to say the music is excellent and exceptional. Again, I hope that might be true. And all these are compelling reasons why people might come in the first place and why they might continue to stay. But the evidence suggests something far more modest and simple.

People are more likely to *continue* coming to a church (and so continue coming to this church!) if they feel they belong. In many ways, the preaching, the music, the worship, the building, the theological position of a church, even if important, only remain important if the communal life matches up.

The ideal might be that people join us and continue to share our life because of conviction. But we should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. And the good in this instance is that for many people – even most people – *belonging comes before believing*. And if this is true (that belonging comes before believing) then we ought to invest in, nurture and indeed celebrate this aspect of our faith. In other words, the quality of our shared life is not an afterthought. Supporting and encouraging people's belonging is not incidental to our life of faith. It is critical.

Now it is very easy for those of us who have been around a while to imagine that everyone experiences a sense of belonging as we do. But of course, this is not the case. People come into our shared life at different stages. In fact, as many different people that are part of our shared life, there are different experiences of belonging! If you have not introduced yourself to someone in our congregation for a while, then make sure you do! Because there *are* new people, and we all have a responsibility to include them. Belonging comes when we sense that here is a people with whom our lives are bound, who show an interest in our lives, who know of our joys and sorrows. Belonging comes when people want *to share* their talents and gifts freely and generously. But who are also able *to receive* what is offered humbly and joyfully. Belonging occurs when we are not only encouraged and nurtured to grow toward the Lord, but we endeavour to *assist others* to be nurtured and grow toward the Lord. Belonging is something that sees us move beyond a consumerist model of faith, which is interested only in, *what do I get out of this?* Belonging occurs when we are able to ride out together the bad times (which will certainly occur in the life of faith) along with the good.

Last week I mentioned that at the heart of Christian faith is the living encounter with Jesus Christ. He invites us to relationship with him. He extends the invitation – *come and see*. We do not enter that relationship by reason or argument or debate, simply by accepting the invitation. And growing into the living encounter with him we will grow into knowledge of the truth about him. While the nature of this encounter is personal – it truly is a call upon the hearts of individual men and women – it is not as an *isolated individual*. The call to Jesus – his invitation – is always to the company of others.

This impulse is imprinted into the very DNA of what it means to be a Christian, of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It is implied in the very good news - the gospel - Jesus proclaims. We see this indicated in the gospel text placed before us today, that at the heart of Jesus' proclamation is 'the Kingdom'. Now, a kingdom is a communal, social experience! This idea is explored in the New Testament in a myriad of ways. The Body, the Vine, the Sheepfold, the Holy Nation, and so on. In short, following Christ is not an individual path to self-enlightenment. It is a call to community.

This pattern we further see reflected in the call of the first disciples. From the very start (and we are only in the opening verses of Chapter One of Mark's gospel!) as Jesus sets out to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, Jesus builds around himself a community. He calls four men - Simon and Andrew, James and John - and in so doing signals that discipleship and life in community will be central to the story that unfolds.

Reinforcing this impression is the fact that these first disciples are two pairs of brothers. Calling two pairs of brothers brings the 'family' aspect to the fore. For these first disciples, following Jesus is going to mean leaving their natural family behind to find themselves members of a new family whose father is God. Put the other way around, in the community of the Kingdom, which Jesus in the gospel today is beginning to gather, the relationships that will, or ought to, prevail – with God, with Jesus, with each other - will be familial ones.

Now, we should not underestimate the value of this belonging. This is a real missional opportunity. If you come from a secure, loving stable family, thanks be to God for that. But plenty of people don't. If you come from a large network of friends and colleagues, thanks be to God for that. But there are plenty of people who don't. If you have all the answers to life worked out and if you have a fulfilled, interesting and varied life, thanks be to God for that. But plenty of people don't. One of the greatest and most dangerous pathologies of our age is loneliness. It is the ailment of our age that the church, better than anyone, is programmed to address. Christ's invitation, yes, is one to relationship with him. But it is also an invitation to relationship with each other, the members of his living body. This is not an incidental detail about our faith. As the gospel shows us, it is imprinted into the very foundation. If we live this aspect of our faith well – with generosity and forgiveness, with love and mercy alongside truth and integrity – then we will live a compelling witness that speaks to the truth of Christ and of his gospel. In a fragmented, divided world, the church indeed continues to be good news. Amen.