Springfield Presbyterian Church

February 12th, 2023

Who Do I Belong To?

1. Introduction

This term at Duke, I am taking a class on New Testament and

Leadership and we are diving deep into Paul’s letter to the Philippians. When I look at today’s reading, as opposed to the Philippians, I can see how differently Paul speaks to each community – he tries to meet them right where they are and the issues they are confronting dynamically.

Something I’ve been thinking about this season more than ever is – Paul couldn’t rely on text messages of emails or a Facebook post full of updates. How did he get the news? How long did it take for one letter to get to the community and news to get back? I can’t imagine Paul would have ever dreamt that his letters would end up in a book of Scripture and if he did – would he frame his words differently? I have so many questions for Paul, this complicated, sometimes contradictory human, who is trying to spread the news of the Gospel everywhere he goes.

1. Corinthians

Paul’s letters differ to each community, and his first letter to

the Corinthians feels like it comes from a parent trying to instruct children on how to behave in a Christian manner. For instance, as many of you may know, the famed line from this letter, “Love is patient, love is kind” and so on that is beautifully said at weddings is actually a condemnation of the Corinthians. It should be heard more like, “Love is patient and love is kind, but you aren’t acting like that, so get yourself together.”

As always, context is important – so we know that the

Corinthians are struggling to implement this Gospel life into their own secular lives. Why? A few reasons come to mind, but here’s one – the Gospel is a radical change from the way things are and when change happens – anxiety happens in the community. People rebel, resist, and some try to march on and live out the Gospel feeling marginalized.

1. Who Do I Belong To?

In our passage today, the Corinthians are struggling in their

historical context to not align themselves with one person or another. That’s why Paul writes, “What then is Apollos? What then is Paul?” because he knows that while the Corinthians may be well intending in giving credit to who they find their faith in, they seem to miss the point entirely. Paul is getting back to basics because there is quarreling and fighting and while it might read a little hurtful to the modern ear – he has to give them milk, not solid food – a metaphor to show their infancy in following the Gospel.

Paul’s message here is artfully simple, but critical – respect those who formed you, but know that any transformation and real change comes from God alone. Paul puts this beautifully when he says – someone can plant a seed – and that’s our job as disciples, right? We seek to plant seeds, but the real growth isn’t through us, it is through God alone. So, who do we belong to – we belong to God.

1. Modern Riff

I would like to bring in some modern examples to help us set the

stage for understanding in our own context. First though, I’d like to offer this groundwork: belonging is a good thing, it is a necessary thing. Belonging to a community such as Springfield, or a school, or a group is no bad thing. Think about it – from the beginning of time, Adam couldn’t be on this earth alone – Adam needed another human to journey with and the same is true for us. We need each other…we just run into a problem when we become so absorbed in belonging to a group that we forget our identity as children of God.

I am guilty of this, especially as a prideful Presbyterian, when I say, “Oh, I am part of the Presbyterian Church” and look a bit smug about it. Pride is good, belonging is good – it just gets a bit dangerous when I think my way is better than the Methodists or Lutherans or choose the denomination of your choice. I belong to the Presbyterian church, but really, I belong to God – the Presbyterian church and those in it in my life have planted seeds, but God brings me to the pulpit on a Sunday morning. God meets me at 2 am and lets me ask the hard questions. God works in me to make me a better person than the day before. Yes, the Presbyterian church and those in my formative community planted those seeds – but it is God who does the work.

On a secular level, you can get into all sorts of areas of belonging, maybe most notably, “I am a Democrat, I am a Republican, I am an Independent” or “I am a liberal, I am a conservative, I am moderate.” Usually, those affiliations have some baggage tied up in their title. Like Paul says in Corinthians – again, this is where we can see quarreling and disunity, and Paul is trying to pull the community back together again. Yes, you may belong to these groups – they may give you life and energy – but above all, remember that you belong to God.

And on a Sunday like this, the Super Bowl Sunday, you know that there will be some hearty and hopefully healthy competition between the Eagles and Chiefs. There’s a sense of belonging, especially for those who follow those teams closely. The unfortunate part is that someone has to win and someone has to lose. What we would do well to remember is that it is indeed, I dare say, it is just football. It is a game. It is when we cross the line into fighting and slurs and dehumanizing that we lose complete sight of the fun that such a game can inspire.

1. Leaders

So yes, let us affirm that belonging to a church, a political party,

a same-interest group is a good thing. Paul isn’t looking to pull people from these groups, he just wants them to get back to the basics and remember where they come from.

Another important point that Paul does not explicitly say, but is crucial as we seek to be disciples, is that…someone needs to plant the seed. In other words, we are called to plant seeds within one another to help each other grow into the fullness of faith. What does it look like to plant a seed? Maybe it’s through asking hard questions of one another and self-examination. It could be in fellowship and hearing a story that brings a new insight into our minds. A seed could be a simple statement on a Sunday morning that dwells with us into the week. When we are planting seeds, we usually don’t know it – but as disciples of Christ, it is important that simply through living as Christ followers we can help plant seeds. That’s where God does the good work of growth, transformation, and change.

This week, I want you to thank God for the good work that God continues to do within and through you each and every day. I want you to give thanks to God that you belong to God – God continues to call you beloved. I also would like you to think about those groups you belong to and give thanks for them, think about how they’ve planted seeds in you. Additionally, ask yourself, and this is tough – are the groups I belong to good for me? Are they going to plant seeds that will lead me closer to following God more faithfully?

May the words of Paul still speak to us today as we plant seeds of hope within one another. May we grow through the power of God alone to be more faithful disciples of Christ and follow the Spirit wherever she may lead. Amen.