

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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May 15, 2022

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do I belong here?

This is a question over the last four years, that I have had to ask myself over and over again. Do I belong here? We know, especially in uncomfortable, new, or unfamiliar situations, how it feels to be out of place. I want to share a little story from my life where I was considering if I belonged.

I had a friend who invited me to a fundraising gala that was really special to him. It was in a large venue with a formal dress code and a lot of people attending. As I arrived at the venue with my friend, I felt like I did NOT belong here. I quickly recognized I may be out of my depth at this fundraising/networking event because I had mostly been anticipating just having a nice meal with my friend.

As we walked in, my friend stopped to say hello to seemingly everyone he saw. I could feel my anxiety rising as I anticipated being left alone and the out of place person at the event. We made our way to the registration table when I noticed a prominent state senator finding his nametag. Now I knew, I certainly did not belong here and as I searched for my nametag; my heart dropped when I saw the unmistakable typo that would have me explaining all night that my name was not “Mason Fugate.”

But in this moment of uncomfortability, this moment where I was convinced, I did not belong, something beautiful happened. My friend noticed this typo on the name tag and before I could even say anything, he let out a huge laugh. He laughed so much other people started to look over and I couldn't help myself but to laugh along with him at this silly typo.

Our relationship, the friendship where we could belly laugh in the middle of a room of strangers, made me feel comfortable. The belonging I felt had nothing to do with where I was, it had all to do with the community and love I shared with my friend.

In our reading from Acts, this question of belonging is also playing a prominent role. Simon Peter is being questioned by the Christ-following Judeans who have become aware that he had gone to a Gentile household.

Peter explains to those who are questioning him his rationale, He had a vision that leads him to go into this Gentile household where he preaches to them. When it becomes evident that the Holy Spirit is in this place and has fallen upon those who are there, Peter is reminded of Jesus speaking about baptism and so he proceeds and baptizes the gentiles in the household.

This in itself is a radical act of welcoming where many of these early followers would be wary of welcoming Gentiles into the community. Even still, it would seem that these baptisms are not the most barrier breaking action that Peter takes. The question posed to Peter is, "why does he eat with these men? Why does he share a table with them?"

This act of sharing a table with the gentiles is a radical one. This religious custom of eating together would break the Jewish kosher laws and upset the expectations of these early Christ-followers. They are wrestling with these laws and how or if these gentiles could be included within their community of faith. Peter radically breaks down this barrier and chooses to welcome these gentiles in through baptism when the presence of the Holy Spirit becomes obvious but even more, he chooses to welcome them on their own terms.

Peter is willing to break with tradition and meet these strangers where they are. He shares in a meal with them that signifies their togetherness and community. The act of judgement, who is in right relationship with God, is left for God to decide but the principle that Peter leads with is love.

Love for those in his community and welcoming new people into relationship. Any law that is being broken that would separate people from one another in this community of faith is a law that can be set aside. God desires each of us to be together, to belong to one another in a community of love and service.

Jesus is our example. In our Gospel, Judas has just left the last supper, beginning the process of betraying Jesus. As Jesus, speaks with his disciples, aware of what is to transpire, he offers a new commandment. A command that becomes one of the central tenets of our Christian faith, our greatest expectation, and a promise of things to come.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This commandment of love comes when it would have been easy to turn inward. To condemn Judas and act in a way that would preserve himself. Instead, our Lord, Jesus Christ offers us a new commandment of radical love and relationship. Fittingly, he shares this commandment with his community, the community that has been with him throughout his ministry, will weep at his death, celebrate his resurrection, and carry on his ministry in the time after Jesus’ ascension.

I think, in our current context and understanding of the world, it is easy to complicate love. To look for big gestures or to safeguard against those who seek to take advantage of love. Love is that compelling force that brings us closer to one another even when we are unsure. Love is saying the hard thing when someone that trusts you needs to hear it. Love is reaching out past the social boundaries that we enforce on ourselves in order to be right so that we may can spread God’s love further and deeper in this world.

That is the challenge, to push ourselves past our comfort zone and into a new vision of love. God is love and we are called to be God’s disciples by spreading this love. This is a community that is intentional about being welcoming to ALL people. I wonder though, how we each can spread this love in new ways and deepen our Christian relationship in this world.

Whenever we are beginning something new or moving into an uncertain place, most of us feel like I did at that gala. That uncertainty and unfamiliarity about our belonging creeps in and makes us second guess if this is a place we belong. No matter how welcoming the system was, no matter how familiar I felt, the relationship I had with my friend was what assured me that I mattered and that I belonged.

Whether it is a church picnic, saying hello to your neighbors, stopping to have lunch with someone new at work, or reaching out to someone you have not talked to in a long time, let us be moved to cultivate those life-giving relationships.

The breaking in of God's kingdom, our discipleship to Christ starts when we reach past ourselves and laugh with someone else. When we share in a meal that might not be comfortable for us. When we advocate for those on the margins and truly welcome them into our communities but into our own lives. Let these relationships flourish, let God's love abound, and let us be reminded of the eternal promise that Jesus continues to extend to us. Amen.