

Sunday, September 25, 2022

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON
You Belong

INTRODUCTION

The acerbically witted comedian and popular game show host, Groucho Marx once famously quipped, "I refuse to belong to any club that would have someone like me as a member."

I used that one a lot when I was asked to join a church or the Rotary Club or an over 40 softball league. I think the reason that Groucho's brilliant one-liner remains among his most remembered is because the underlying truth is so very profound. Every single one of us stands between the paradoxical tension of wanting desperately to belong while also wondering if that social connection is in alignment with our true identity. For better or worse, to be a "member" says something about who you are, what your interests are and the kind of people you like to be affiliated with. Just like individuals, organized groups and institutions also have a distinctive core personality and a cultivated identity.

We do. As a church organization, TriCon's primary identity is a nurturing community of faith. I think that is pretty accurate. We give a lot of attention to creating a hospitable environment. We want to be a place where that joyous feeling of being accepted, worthy and connected is unfettered and abundant no matter who you are. Have you ever asked yourself why that is? Why is it that "community" is the core, distinctive essence of TriCon Church?

Listen to what the primary framer of the Christian tradition, the Apostle Paul, had to say about this to a new church start up in Philippi. He points out that our faith in Christ is more an ongoing activity rather than a passive attitude we put on to wear to church.

SCRIPTURE **Philippians 2:1-3**

So, does belonging to Christ help you in any way? Does his love comfort you at all? Do you share anything in common because of the Holy Spirit? Has Christ ever been gentle and loving toward you? If any of these things has happened to you, then agree with one another. Have the same love. Be one in spirit and in the way you think and act. By doing this, you will make my joy complete. Don't do anything only to get ahead. Don't do it because you are proud. Instead, be humble. Value others more than yourselves.

The Word of God for the people of God.

SERMON: *You Belong*

Hardwired into any group, or club, organization or culture of any kind there is an inherent tension between our self-definition as an individual and the yearning need to find our place in the larger group. As we grow and mature, an internal tug of war battles to balance the person we think we are against the person we present to the world. Our individual sense of self often struggles to find authenticity, expression and validation in a group. We are constantly pulled or pushed in one direction or another. The community teaches us how to behave, tells us what is and is not acceptable and, for better or worse, defines our sense of place in the world we live in. The tribes we find ourselves with or choose to join shape our biases, develop our attitudes and greatly influence how we see and interact with others. Imbedded in these social environments our deeper inner self senses a lingering presence of an invisible worthiness inspector, monitoring our appearance, checking our language, assessing our behavior and attitude. If you don't make the grade, you will feel the chilling threat of being exiled. To protect our cherished place in the group requires constant self-assessment to ensure your position or risk the humiliation of being called out. It is a life-long battle to be accepted for who you truly are in the context of community.

Sadly, religious institutions are notorious for being head coach of team conformity. The fact is that many churches are actually designed and even rigidly defined by their strict adherence to conforming to codes of practice. Any personal identity that strays from what the church agrees is "godly" will be quickly reprimanded, either directly by the authority or implicitly by the group. To be sure, one way or the other you will get the message. Conform or be banished from the chosen community.

Religious cults rely entirely on our desire to belong. When God's approval or the stern threat of divine judgement is layered on top of our deeply rooted need to belong, religious orthodoxy becomes a powerful and effective weapon used to target and destroy anyone who refuses to happily fall in line. But if you think about it, this same model exists in one form or another in every community setting, from the PTA to the neighborhood church, individual transparency is generally too great a risk and we all are less because of it.

Paul knows well this tension between individual self-expression and sharing a common identity. It is no easy balance to achieve because it is so radically different than what we often experience, but Paul is convinced that when we truly focus on the Gospel story, we see that this is exactly what God wants to create in the Church. So many of his letters find him pleading with his young

startup church communities. He desperately wants them to thrive in the freedom Christ has given them. In his letter to the Romans, he writes this.

Those who belong to Christ Jesus are no longer under God's judgment. ² Because of what Christ Jesus has done, you are free. You are now controlled by the law of the Holy Spirit who gives you life. The law of the Spirit frees you from the law of sin that brings death.

He is convinced that God's desire is for followers of Jesus to create and live in this heavenly kinship now, here on earth. The church is supposed to nurture and bring forth a working example of how the Holy Spirit moves among us in the creation of communal heaven on earth. Paul shows us exactly how to achieve that kind of church. He insists, that we must dare to exercise the same crazy love that God has given to us. In other words, don't run from the dualistic tension between personal identity and group acceptance, rather reflect the same life-affirming love of Christ to one another. Authentic church communities will actually rejoice in our distinctive difference and, astonishingly enough, find that our liberated true identity is enhanced and awakened in union with others who are very different than us. Paradoxically, individualism in this social framework is what it means to be one in Christ. To be one is to equally value our inherent need to be accepted in the group even while offering every authentic beautifully broken soul a place to find true expression.

The Way of Jesus always seems to go against what we think of as normative. His wide embrace, acceptance and love overturns the neatly arranged, prescribe carts of social order. He equalizes the weighted scales between community approval and authentic selfhood. Jesus offers all who would dare to join him a freedom that affirms our common struggle to discover our true self-expression in the context of a supportive community. It is a kinship of beautifully-broken souls where each member is honestly valued as part of the community.

Two weeks ago, I spoke about how our core identity in Christ is centered in the reality that we are all beautifully broken. The shadowed, unworthy, self-absorbed identity is gently held in God's grace and Christ's bottomless love and redemption. When we actually allow grace to absorb and mold that hard truth, we are set free to claim our corporate identity as a community of beautifully broken people and find great joy in dispensing grace freely to one another.

The poet/philosopher John O'Donohue articulates this most beautiful truth when he writes,

There is a divine restlessness in the human heart,
our eternal echo of longing
that lives deep within us
and never lets us settle for what we have
or where we are...

This is a most basic of human desires -

the desire to belong.

It's a desire
that constantly draws us
toward new possibilities
of self- discovery, friendship, and creativity.¹

O'Donohue adds exquisite texture and color to Paul's plea. It is deeply imbedded desire to be part of an affirming community that actually draws out our individual self-discovery. We desperately need both. Our common unity can only be found in a community that openly fosters, even demands, that we bring both the shadow and light of our individualism to comingle and thrive in the same collective space. This is a space where the tension between our unique distinctiveness and the longing to belong is transformed into a magic key that opens us to new possibilities of self-discovery.

To hold tension is not something that come easily for most of us. It takes courage, faith and a boatload of courage to see it through - especially when it gets messy, when egos are bruised or misunderstandings remain unresolved. We must always monitor and assess that our church identity is continually moving toward nurturing and affirming the individual in the context of community. We must never succumb to the easy path of exceptionalism, ridged conformity or exclusiveness. We are all struggling to find the right way.

So, does belonging to Christ help you in any way? Does his love comfort you at all? Do you share anything in common because of the Holy Spirit? Has Christ ever been gentle and loving toward you? If so then we will notice an ever-growing ease in developing our individual distinctive, unmasked identity.

¹ John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong*

Our communal spiritual journey toward self-discovery must be free to fearlessly face the broken places with the same diligence it gives to the beautiful well-functioning ones. Shaping our core identity as a church is an ongoing, ever-changing process that revolves around choice, emotion, and an eclectic approach to how we understand God. To shape a nurturing community of faith is a deliberate choice we must all share together. In the end, we really do want to be the club that would have someone like you as a member. At TriCon church, you truly do belong. So stay a while and see what new possibilities of self- discovery, friendship, and creativity emerge.

AMEN!