

Pastor John Kepler
 May 30, 2021
 John 17:20-23



"Needing to Belong"

Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from Almighty God and our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

He had been dating the younger woman for over five years. They had met at the downtown Methodist church where he served as choir director. It was New Year's Eve in 1914. She had written him a brief note and the 30-year-old Chicago piano salesman sat down to write a letter to his fiancée. Their wedding was just months away and they were planning to move to California.

"My dear Laura--

Thank you for your little letter. I fully appreciate it. Wish I had the faculty of showing my appreciation, but somewhere along the way that valuable trait has been lost. However, I am very sure I do feel deeply all the kind expression of love and I wish and wish over and over again and again that I were very different. But somehow I never get away from doing things alone. It must be great to confide in someone else to tell your troubles, real or otherwise and to be advised. But I can't. Never could, I guess it was born in me to keep all to myself and perhaps it is best."

What is interesting is what my grandfather Myers wrote following this opening admission of loneliness, solitude, and inability to express his feelings. He proceeds to share exactly what he said he could not do:

He pours out his heart about his financial troubles that have led to debt, he writes of "learning to gauge my heart to my pocketbook,"

He poetically wrote that "we learn to love the places where we suffer most." The outpouring of tenderness and emotion is moving, especially coming from one who had earlier written that he was born to "keep to himself."

My grandfather was born out of wedlock in Ireland and then raised by an aunt and uncle, who he was told were his biological parents. As a young teenager, he was placed on a boat for Canada to escape the terrible economic conditions in Ireland.

Eventually, he found his way to Chicago...and also learned the bitter truth of his birth and the deception that had been played on him. He never spoke of his childhood and youth to his daughter, my mother. I am confident that he did to one person, however, the dear Laura he married.

In reading my grandfather's words, I was struck by his deep need to belong, to have someone with whom he could share life and himself, despite his protestation that he was "born to keep to himself." Can anyone ever really do that?

Why else do we seek relationships with others, join clubs and teams, seek approval of our friends at school and work, etc? We want, we need to be part of something...we want to belong. It is a yearning,

a need, that God has built into every human being. It is my hunch that during the past 15 months many of us have had moments like that...lonely, isolated feelings.

This simple fact is not forgotten by the Lord Jesus. John's gospel spends several chapters recording Jesus' words to and prayer for his disciples shortly before his arrest. Mostly, these words seem to fall under the broad brush stroke of "encouragement," and how believers can move ahead in life sharing the good news of Christ.

Think with me for a few moments around these four verses and the issue of our belonging to each other and to the Lord. For, perhaps, in these words there is something important for us to consider not only for our individual lives, but for the life of the church.

JESUS PRAYS FOR UNITY, THE BELONGING OF BELIEVERS TO ONE ANOTHER.

Jesus prayed not only for his disciples, but for us, "On behalf of those who will believe in me.....that they may all be one." The Scriptures don't necessarily seek uniformity; but there is a plea for unity, a sense of belonging that goes beyond differences.

This is not a prayer for the creation of Christian clones, where everyone behaves, thinks, dresses, and eats exactly alike...although there continue to be groups that try to legislate that.

It never was nor should be the intention of the Christian faith to make every human being alike; but it is the intention of the Christian faith to have people belong to one another because of Jesus Christ.

Any church must somehow find ways to underscore and affirm this sense that we belong to each other if a positive witness is to be made to the world. There will be differences of opinion; there are differences in personalities. But if we begin by affirming that because of Jesus Christ we belong to each other, we are a community for each other, then we can be used by the Lord "so the world may believe."

I think there are many in today's world who are looking for a people who can rise beyond themselves through commitment to each other. But when non-Christians sense that Christians are no different than the politics of the world, then why should they bother to be part of such a community?

Back in 1977, I was serving the Newport Covenant Church in Washington. We were going through a major building program. The Building Committee was a fine group of committed people, Jim and Chuck being two of them. They were very strong willed men. These two had known each other for years and, as I found out later, their conflicts were legendary.

At one meeting they got into a horrendous debate about how to proceed selecting a contractor. I began breaking out in a cold sweat. Jim and Chuck continued to go at it. I wanted to crawl away or hide under the table. I simply didn't and still don't handle confrontation very well. I wished we could all just join hands around the table and sing "Kum-bah-ya."

The meeting ended with the situation still tense. I sat slumped in my chair, exhausted and I hadn't even verbally participated. Chuck came over and asked if I wanted to go out for some pie and coffee. I remember thinking, "Now I going to get another ear-full." But I was, and still am, a pie lover.

We met at Denny's and, as we walked in, Chuck said, "Ah, there he is!" pointing a Jim sitting in a booth. "My goodness!" I thought to myself, "There's more to endure!" But what I discovered over pie and coffee was that these two men were brothers in Christ....they belonged to each other.

"We got rather intense tonight, didn't we pastor? Ah, we'll get this all worked out...the Lord has a way of pulling us together." Over the course of the next months I saw two people pull, tug, and push at each other, but their commitment to Christ and His church never wavered. They never belittled nor accused the other.

The fact of the matter is that we cannot be a Christian all by ourselves. Chuck and Jim needed each other...and they knew it. We need each other, we belong to each other whether we like it or not. That's what Jesus prayed. How well we go about showing that belonging is an indicator of how well we are able to witness to our world.

Jesus knew the importance of his people belonging to each other; He prayed for it. He also prayed to God specifically that to belong to each other comes through belonging to Him.

The latter part of v.21 reads, "May they also be in us..." and in v. 23, "I in them and you in me." This is an interesting concept in John's writings and are echoed often by the Apostle Paul: the Christian is "in Christ" and that "Christ is in" the person.

The very basis for our belonging together is our belonging to Jesus. One of the dead-end streets often walked down today is our trying to fulfill this spiritual vacuum on purely human terms. People get married, join clubs, go to parties, sing in choirs, and even join churches seeking to belong.

People go through all kinds of religious motions and activities hoping that somehow they will belong: politics, sports teams, even countries. But our deepest need to belong really centers around our need to belong to the Lord. As Saint Augustine wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you..."

Everything, we are told from the Bible, spins off our relationship with Jesus Christ. If we first do not belong to Jesus, then our attempts to belong to each other are nothing more than human longings that end with our death. One's life and death depend on that belonging. One's relationships with others depends on that belonging.

Indeed, the ability of the world to know about the Lord depends on by belonging to Christ. Jesus prayed, "I in them...so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you God have loved me."

As we are twenty years into the 21st century, the survival of a church depends not on brick and mortar, budget reserves, memorial funds, increases in membership numbers, or even friendships.

The future depends on Jesus' prayer being lived out: are we able to consistently affirm our belonging to Jesus Christ? And in belonging to Him, that we belong to each other? We are the Body of Christ...say it with me, "WE ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST!" AMEN.