

WHAT ON EARTH AM I HERE FOR?

PART 3, October 18, 2020

BELONGING TOGETHER

I want to start with a little exercise. So if you would bear with me just for a moment or two. If you would close your eyes. So go ahead. Close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths. Clear your mind. Just clear your mind. Eyes closed.

I want to ask you... What do you see in your mind's eye when I say the word "home"? What do you see? What's happening right now? Just keep your eyes closed for a moment. Some of you are seeing pictures maybe of the house you live in. Who's there? What are the faces? Faces of loved ones, maybe of children playing. Some of you see something from your past, maybe the house where you grew up, streets where you played. Maybe you see your mom and dad.

Keep your eyes closed still. For some of you, this word "home" is bringing up hopes about the future. You're seeing ahead. You're imagining a relationship or a family you long to have.

For some of you, the word "home" brings to mind fond thoughts, they bring a smile to your face. For others, home is a hard word, isn't it? Some of you see memories that might have some tension, some pain, some difficulty, and some brokenness.

As I look out right now, I see some of you are now falling asleep, so open your eyes.

It has been said that home is where the heart is, and truly there are few words that tug on our hearts like that word home. A home is far more than just a house on a particular street in a particular town. Home is that place where you're safe. Home is that place where you're known. Home is a place where you can let down your guard. I once heard it said home is a place where you can talk all you want because no one is really listening. Home is a place to belong. Home is a place to be loved. We all need a place we call home.

Mid-twentieth-century psychologist named Abraham Maslow published a paper on what motivates human behavior, what drives you to do what you do, and what he found was that after the basic physical

and psychological needs for food and safety have been met, after the bare minimum stuff of survival has been met, the most powerful driver of human behavior is the need to belong, the need to be loved, the need to be in friendship or family, the need to have deep and meaningful relationships. It far superseded the need for wealth or for comfort or for reputation or for achievement or for recognition. It was far more important than that.

This should not be too much of a surprise. This is exactly how you were made, exactly how God wired human beings. If you look back to the story of creation in the Bible, you will find what to me is one of the most surprising verses in all of Scripture. It's Genesis 2:18. Listen to this. ***"The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone.'"*** Now let's think about this for a moment. Up until this point in the story everything God had made had been good or very good. Why? Because there is no sin. Everything has been done according to God's will. Everything is just as it should be, but God in the midst of this paradise and perfection says, "Wait! Stop! Something is not good."

God identifies something missing, something incomplete. God identified a certain need in the human beings He created. That need God identified in the human race is that we are relational beings. So to fully experience God and to enjoy the life He has given us, human beings need meaningful relationships with other human beings. You need it. You are made for it. It's not something that's wrong with you; it's something that's right with us that we all need close, meaningful relationships.

This truth resonates all the way throughout the Bible. Listen to Psalm 133:1. It says, ***"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"*** How good and pleasant.

The writer of Hebrews says, ***"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another..."*** What's so fascinating is the writer of Hebrews is pointing out that some people have given up on community. They've given up on relationship. They've given up on encouragement. Why? Well because of human sin of course. You go all the way back to the beginning. Human sin did

not just fracture our relationship with God. It wasn't just we now stood separated from God. We were separated from each other. The story shows it. Adam turns against Eve. Eve turns against Adam. Cain kills Abel. We see the fracturing of human relationships spinning out of control. Back then, and in every one of our lives today, we have all experienced distrust, insecurity, shame, vengeance, hatred, and resentment. This is the result of sin in the human community God created.

See, it's a real paradox that God made you to be a relational person because God intended for people to be the solution to your need, but now because we're sinful and broken, people are part of our problem. We have all been in a relationship or a situation where we think, "that person is such a problem; what they said, what they did, what they're doing."

God's design for humans to be relational beings has broken down because of sin. And look around you: more and more people are responding to this brokenness, they're responding to their inner insecurity. They're responding to this even sinful brokenness by disconnecting from relationship just as Adam and Eve did in the garden by hiding and blaming and posturing. This is how we do life, and more and more people are living isolated and disconnected lives, and the numbers bear it out.

According to a study in the American Sociological Review, one out of every four Americans have no close confidants in their life...zero. One out of every four, no one in their life they fully trust, no one in their life with whom they feel safe. We may even be surrounded by people at home or at work, but still feel isolated, still have no close confidants. For many it's a secret they have, it's a habit they don't want anyone to know about, it's a fear they're unwilling to share, that drives them to remain isolated.

Disconnected kind of living is having a disastrous effect not just on our spirit and soul but on our health as well. Studies show that those who lack meaningful relationships are more prone to sadness, anxiety, substance abuse, sexual problems, depression, and suicide. It's not good to be alone.

I recently read about the true story of a woman named Carol. Carol was making a phone call, and she accidentally dialed the wrong number. Carol lived on the West Coast and someone on the East Coast answered the phone. The woman who answered sounded a little distraught, and so Carol spent a few minutes just talking to her. Carol really didn't think much about the conversation until at the end of the phone call the woman on the other line whose name was Sue said, "Hey, can we talk again sometime?" Carol thought, Well okay. Sounds a little bit weird, but, "Sure, let's talk again sometime." So they talked again ... and again and again and again. They talked every week about life, love, and family, and work, and even faith. Carol shared about her faith in Christ.

About a year later, Carol had a business trip to the East Coast, and so she decided she would go and see Sue who had become a really good friend. They go out to dinner, and they're having a conversation, and then Sue paused and told Carol something she had never told anyone. She said, "About a year earlier I had gotten so lonely, so desperate, so depressed, so isolated that I decided the only thing I could do was commit suicide." So she got in her car, was driving to a bridge preparing to jump off of it. She actually ran out of gas along the way. So she had to get help with her car. Someone drove her home where she sat by herself isolated, helpless, feeling alone, like such a failure, and then the phone rang. Guess who it was? It was a wrong number named Carol.

It was those conversations with Carol that began to give her hope. It was those little conversations once a week across the country with Carol that began to assure her that she mattered. It was those conversations that led her to actually start considering the question of God and faith in her life. It was Carol's conversations and friendship that actually led her to start going to church and asking for help, and seeking a place of healing where she could belong. It was those conversations with Carol in which Sue found home. She found a home, and it saved her life.

For Sue, and there are many people like her in many different ways, her greatest point of despair, her greatest vulnerability was not

having a sense of belonging. People like Sue, and you and me, feel the most wounded when we do not have a sense of home, do not have a place where we belong, where we're loved, where we're safe, where we're included, where we're accepted, where we matter. The deepest pain in life comes from where you and I feel the most isolated and afraid and insecure. And I would add that the damage from this pandemic is not only the dangerous infection people may catch, not only the physical battle to survive, not only the exhausted health care professionals, and not only the economic loss of wages and businesses. The damage from this pandemic is also the widespread loneliness and isolation from one another. It's the fragmenting of loving relationships that we need to survive because God has made us relational beings.

This place of woundedness is where the gospel of Jesus offers the greatest hope because the gospel of Jesus restores both vertical AND horizontal relationships!

Jesus gave His life to pay for your sinful brokenness, to pay for every act and thought of yours that turns away from God and shatters your relationship with Him. All your sin is rebellion against God, its telling God to give you His stuff and then get *OUT* of your life! But when you come to your senses and you are sorry for trashing the loving, intimate relationship God designed you to have with Him, then, in humility, we realize the depth of the problem we have created. You can't fix your sin, you can't make your wrongs right. But Jesus can. And Jesus did! His death on the cross PAID for it all! He offers you complete forgiveness, free and clear! His gift brings you back to God the Father. He restores your togetherness with God now. And Jesus is the only way to give you togetherness with God forever in heaven. That's what God made you for. He is really with you, and for you, every minute of every day.

But friends, that's not all! Here's something really, really sweet about Jesus' love and what He has done for you – Jesus Christ is not just about restoring your relationship with God so you get that vertical relationship fixed and then you go about your business living your life in isolation again. No, no, no, no, no. The gospel of Jesus is about

restoring human relationship. Its' about community. It's about building something called home.

Listen to the apostle Paul's words in the letter to the church in Ephesus. He wrote, **"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household..."** Do you hear what he's saying? You're part of the family now. This isn't just a go through the motions of religious life performing for God and others so they think you're doing a good job. No! The church is not a place to do religious ritual. The church is a family. God's family. You're in the family now, and there are a bunch of other people in the family. The church is a group of people where we begin, where we practice what it will be like to belong together with these people forever in eternity. The church on earth is to be a place of being home. God's love and forgiveness fills each of us so that we learn to love one another. We are getting practice being in relationship here because that's what God made each of us for, and we are going to be together in perfect relationship with one another for all eternity in heaven.

In a world where sinful brokenness has fragmented relationship, and there is conflict and distrust, insecurity, shame, and vengeance, and isolation, the togetherness of God's family, the Church, the sense of home here, is a place of relief, and refuge, and an island of hope in your life. This, friends, is God's plan for us, His people, His family. This may not be what church has been or what you've experience in the past, or what your expectations of church are, but friends, this is what God made us to be. This is what God wants us to be. This is what we CAN be. This is what we MUST be. This God-created LOVE among His family is to be a light in a dark world. A lamp on a stand. A city on a hill.

We must not follow the relational pattern of the world around us, the pattern of our sinful broken nature. We must LIVE the love of Jesus who has brought us together vertically with our Father, and brought us HOME to His family, horizontally with one another. Jesus said it this way: **"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"** John 13:35.

Before the pandemic came along, when people wore masks, they covered more than just the nose and mouth. And when people wore masks, it was usually only for Halloween. Here is a picture of some masks in a store. Kinda creepy. I would imagine that this afternoon at St. Paul's Trunk-or-Treat we will see kids with superhero masks, and monster masks. And, of course, everyone should be sporting a covid mask too.

Mask-wearing is common in relationships. God's design for togetherness in His family is that there are no relationship masks, no false appearances kept. Just as Adam and Eve had a wholesome, intimate relationship with God before sin entered their lives, God still desires that we be a church with refreshingly authentic loving relationships.

Some years ago, a psychologist named Scott Peck wrote a book called *The Different Drum*, and in it he described four stages communities have to move through to become a true, authentic community.

The first stage he describes - and where many communities get stuck - is what he calls pseudo-community. I shouldn't have to say much about this because I know you all know what this is like. In pseudocommunities people are polite, people are nice, people are friendly, people are well behaved, but they let on very little about themselves. They're often very guarded. They speak in platitudes and generalities and abstractions. "Family's good. Work's going okay. Been pretty busy. Things are all right." It's where people are perpetually nice to each other, but we don't really know each other.

In so many ways we live like this. We settle for superficial conversation. We hide what's really going on from others. We avoid conflict or confrontation when it's needed.

Jesus has no interest in this kind of pseudo-community. Listen to what he said to a group of religious people who were faking it in his eyes. He said, ***"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees... You are like whitewashed tombs...on the outside you appear to people..."*** very important phrase, ***"...as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."***

Jesus is saying, "You are putting on an appearance to others, and it's having affect on community." It's not just that you're hypocritical and that's just a bad thing conceptually; you're actually putting a toxic thing into your relationship with others because all this posturing is really just deceiving. That's a hard word, I know. It cuts me to the core. All the posturing, all the pretending is really just deceiving, and to borrow an expression from Henry Cloud and John Townsend, when there is deception, there is no relationship because you can't have trust. You don't know where to stand. There's no ground to stand on.

So here's what we need to do: We need to courageously transform our togetherness in this family of God to get rid of deception and half-truths, to remove relationship masks. Now, don't misunderstand. It doesn't mean you tell your deepest, darkest secrets to everyone. This simply means you don't create a façade that isn't really you.

This is the vision for what small groups can become. Not just a place to take a class, to learn a lesson for a few weeks, then move on. Small groups can be places where we love one another, know one another, care for one another, and hold one another accountable to growing in Christ-like characteristics. Small groups can become places of being relationally home.

Small groups can also become places where people like us admit our struggles and our brokenness, and there find healing and hope.

Jesus designed the church to be a place where you and I can boldly say, "I need is another sinner to stand with me and to walk with me and to encourage me and to hold me up so I do not have to go it alone." It's not good to be alone. This is God's desire for our togetherness.

Now, it takes courage to be authentic, to remove the masks. The Holy Spirit working in and among us with love and grace is the only way that we can have that courage to transform relationships into the authenticity that is to be the family of God.

We need the Holy Spirit to be authentic. We need the Holy Spirit in us to give us courage to work through relational conflict when it arises. Not everything always goes perfectly between people in God's

family. Relationships WILL be perfect in heaven. But this side of heaven, we don't all agree with each other. We don't all have the same opinions. We actually misunderstand each other. We actually get on each other's nerves. It takes courage to have the conversations needed to reconcile, to forgive, to live God's sense of relational home.

It also takes courage, Holy-Spirit infused courage, to welcome others into this place of being home.

In Jesus' family is unique. His family operates very than our world. In Jesus' family everybody's welcome in. Jesus says, "You're welcome to be here." Listen to this. It's the Gospel of Luke. Luke described a situation that was quite common for Jesus. He says, ***"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"***

What are they seeing Jesus do? Well he's welcoming people, and that word for welcome is not just like a handshake or a hug. That word welcome means to welcome into one's family, to welcome into one's house. Jesus was creating community. He was creating literally a new family where all those who were considered outcasts are now welcome. "Come on in. Come on in. You're welcome to be at my table."

This means whenever you close your eyes and try to imagine home, the place where you are loved, the place where you always belong, what you really need to see is Jesus. For all of those of you who believe in him, you belong to him, and if we believe in him as a church and we belong to him as a church, then all the groups should be homes for people to find him, and that's the kind of community we want to be and become together.