

Waiting to Belong  
December 13, 2009  
Third Sunday of Advent  
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(Luke 3:7-18 NRSV) John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? {8} Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. {9} Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." {10} And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" {11} In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." {12} Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" {13} He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." {14} Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." {15} As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, {16} John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. {17} His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." {18} So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Waiting – I don't know about you, but I don't like to wait.

Whether that is      waiting in line at the store  
                                    Waiting for a table at a restaurant  
                                    Waiting for a flight  
                                    Waiting for something to happen

But advent is all about waiting.

We wait for the advent of Jesus  
    We wait for love  
    We wait for home  
    We wait to belong  
    We wait for Peace  
We wait for a new world to be ushered in

Our scripture passage is interesting this morning. It is a continuation of the story from last week.

Last week the story announced the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist and it told us that his ministry was to be one of proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

(Luke 3:2b-6 NRSV) the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. {3} He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, {4} as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. {5} Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; {6} and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

This week, we hear exactly what John was doing and saying!

(Luke 3:7-14 NRSV) John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? {8} Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. {9} Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." {10} And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" {11} In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." {12} Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" {13} He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." {14} Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

John tells us that if we want to belong we must repent.

And the truth is → we all desperately want to belong

It seems to be something that starts very early for us.

Go into an elementary school classroom, or even a pre-school room and watch the children interact.

Regardless of whether they are shy or not → no child wants to be left out

I can remember as if it was yesterday – when my brothers and I, along with our friends would gather on the church lawn every Saturday and Sunday afternoon to play football, softball, you name it. And the worse part of the day was when we chose up sides

You wanted to be picked early because that meant that you were valued  
 And that didn't always have to do with your athletic ability.  
 The worst thing that could happen was to be picked at the end → when they  
 would throw a couple of people into a group and say "You get them and we'll  
 take these guys." Nobody wants to be an afterthought

We all want to belong  
 We all want to be valued

We seek to belong in a number of places

Family  
 Work  
 Clubs  
 Social or service organizations  
 Church

What is it that makes us feel like we belong?

Is it just being there?  
 Or is it something more?

Jesus and John seem to define belonging very differently. Or at least come at it from  
 two very different perspectives

John invites us to belong

He does this through a three step process that is clearly laid out in the scripture  
 passage this morning.

1. The first step is repentance  
 "He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of  
 repentance for the forgiveness of sins"
2. The second step is you gotta do something  
 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" {11} In reply he  
 said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has  
 none; and whoever has food must do likewise." {12} Even tax collectors  
 came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"  
 {13} He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for  
 you." {14} Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He  
 said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false  
 accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."
3. The third step is to include others along the way

We might call this evangelism today, but I don't think that is really what John was wanting.

John wanted to get us to say the right things or maybe even believe the right things.

Unfortunately, the church has taken John's approach to belong.

Let me try to explain

If our goal is to get people to come down the aisle and join the church then belonging is rather simple

In order to do that we need to do a few things:

1. Make them comfortable when they get here so they will want to come back.  
     Greeters  
     Easy access to parking  
     Make them feel welcome
2. Entertain them so that it is an enjoyable experience and they want to come back  
     I remember a friend commenting to me after visiting one of the largest churches in the Chicago-land area → they called it "The best show in town."
3. Get someone to talk them into making a commitment before they leave.  
     Don't let them leave without closing the deal

The goal of this way of belonging is more about getting you to buy into a belief system.

    Say that you are sorry  
     Believe that Jesus is Lord

And if you do those things --- we then you belong

But that does not seem to be the same thing that Jesus talks about when he invites us to belong.

Jesus does not seem as concerned about doing certain things or believing certain things – instead he seems more interested in making sure that we know that we are loved and accepted and maybe most importantly that we are a part of God.

What Jesus wants is to know is that we are valued  
     We are valuable and our opinions matter

And the church, if it is going to truly be a place where people can belong has to model

the example of Jesus.

Anybody know what the motto is for the United Methodist Church

I love it!

Open hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors

Quit gossiping

Quit judging

Start embracing