

**Sermon: Longing to Belong**

**Scripture: Luke 6**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

**Date: Sept 17, 2023**

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Do you feel like you belong here? I mean here at church in this service of worship this morning, there on-line? I hope you do but I wonder. Do you feel like you belong in the work you are doing as a profession or have you ever felt like an imposter doing what you are doing, like people are going to call you out – “you don’t belong here!” Being in the same profession as my father and my grandfather I sometimes have this sinking gut feeling of what am I doing? Or I can’t imagine people want to hear one more sermon from me?! You know Meryl Streep and Tom Hanks, two of biggest superstars speak of feeling like imposters in their work of acting. Our middle daughter Naomi started Medical School up at UVM about a month ago and one of the first things they talked about as an incoming class was how to manage imposter syndrome – feeling like you just don’t belong. Must be a thing for doctors too. Or how about this: do you feel like you belong in your age, in your 40’s or 50’s or 60’s or however old you are? Unequivocally “no” for me, I feel like I’m in my 30’s.

Do you ever feel like you don’t belong even to the people you belong with, your group of friends? Has it ever felt like that everyone else in the group feels a sense of belonging and it’s just you who feel a little on the outskirts? And would it surprise you to hear that everyone in that group feels a little bit that way like they are the only one who doesn’t quite fit or belong? What about a more existential “here” as in “do you feel like you belong here on earth, in your body, at this point in history?”

Well, I'm sure you know that if you've ever felt any of those things you are not alone, right... for we feel that because we belong to the human race which has this odd disjoint within ourselves which has us feeling like we just. don't. quite. fit. We long for belonging but don't necessarily feel it. There are moments, aren't there, and those moments are holy moments, heavenly moments of belonging and coming home to some extent or another, but there's often a sense that we're just out of place.

That disjoint, that mis-fit, that out-of-place-ness is practically what the Bible was written for. You can't get out of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Genesis before you've been told the story of the first man and the first woman coming to realize that they don't belong in the Garden of Eden. And then you encounter this nomadic tribe of Hebrew people who rarely belong and though they are promised a Promised Land more prominent is the story of their enslavement where they SO don't belong that in fact they belong to someone else, their owned by others. IT's the first we hear that such a condition of not belonging or belonging to others is NOT ok by God so God finds an outsider of a person in Moses to let God's people go and the Hebrews wander for 40 years in a wilderness where they don't belong. They finally come to that Promised Land and the Canaanite tribes who have taken up residence there certainly don't defer to the Hebrew claim that it's their promised land but they settle nonetheless and build a temple as a place of belonging for them, but they eventually get steamrolled by greater empires than themselves, the temple of belonging is destroyed and they are exiled from where they belong to again where they don't belong in Syria and Persia and Babylon. A remnant eventually returns, another temple built but their home is eventually occupied by Rome and they are made to feel like they don't belong in their land, a reality and a

threat that persists up to the horrors of Holocaust, one of the most vivid examples of being told that you don't belong.

But we say the Messiah came out of this people at the turning of the age and you'd sure think that the Sovereign of the Universe incarnate as human in the form of the Jewish man named Jesus from Nazareth, you'd think that he at least would belong but we know that story well and he's born in poverty and has to escape to Egypt because Herod's decided he doesn't belong. And much of Jesus' ministry is among the mis-fits and he seems to best belong not with the religious leaders in the temple and the synagogues but with those who don't belong. And He gathers up all this not-belonging, knowing how deeply and painfully those around him long for belonging and he says

"I've got good news for you. There is actually a place where you belong and it's in the heart of God, it's as a citizen of the realm of God, and it's right here among us, a state of heart and mind and it's true regardless of how dismissed you've been or marginalized and excluded, no matter how society has framed you as mis-fit you fit with me and you fit with God."

And despite that beautiful message of belonging or because of that message the powers-that-be came down hard on him and said "you don't determine who belongs here, we'll decide that and in fact you are suspect number 1 of people who don't belong here!" and so they executed him on the cross and they spread his arms and nailed down his hands in ironically a gesture of wide open receptivity and embrace! By excluding him in the most complete way, by way of death, they unwittingly opened a gateway of belonging that reverberated through the ages and across the world. To all those told you don't belong his spread wide arms say YOU DO BELONG with me! Which it turns out was God's

intention all along from the beginning to alert us humans to the fact that we belong to the heart of God. We are God's children and beloved of and belonging to God.

And quickly upon the resurrection there arose gatherings of people who understood this and believed this and intentionally created homes and houses of belonging in God's Spirit and the church was born. And of course the church being an all-too-human institution at times has taken God's project of belonging and found a way to disinvite people and make them feel like they don't belong, but it's foundation and its purpose is to create a house of belonging for God's people.

Which brings me back to my first question – do you belong here?

The simple answer to that is yes. Of course you belong here. It's not my church or the church of those who have been here the longest or the church of those who pledge and give money to keep the lights on and the doors open – though thank you so much those of you who do that! – it's the church of Jesus Christ. It's God's house of prayer. Everyone who holds a special place in the heart of God belongs here and that's every single one of us.

That's one of our goals as a church - to create a community of belonging here. In our purpose statement we say – “We are Christ-centered nurturing community growing in faith, serving in love and welcoming all with joy.” So we hope you can find a house of belonging here if you want it. We are so glad that when those of you who consider this your church came here at first there was enough sense of belonging that it overshadowed any sense of not fitting in even if that's still a lingering sense you might have, trust me when I say to you, you belong here... and if not here cause there are different strokes of churches for different folks, for sure, so if not here then absolutely you belong to God and a

community somewhere who understands how you are loved and favored by God thanks to Jesus' claim on your life.

I wonder how many people out there in our wider community belong in here and just don't know it yet? Well, we won't know until we go out there and welcome them in... which, I want to share with you, is what some of us are going to do in the weeks ahead. It's kind of radical, I realize, for our progressive Christian community here in New England to be doing it, but we feel it's really important to do so. Your Ministry Team which is now myself, Maeve, Jane and Maggie with Sarah Marino's support have been working for the last month on a project called "Welcome Home" with the blessing of your Leadership Team. We've been meeting with a marketing director out in LA, a friend of Jane's who has been leading us in developing materials about our church that we can share with newcomers to Winchester. And with the help of some of the Deacons and the Leadership Team (and anyone else among us who is interested, I might add) we are going to make some baked goods and bring them to people moving into town with a big "welcome to town, we are glad you are here!" to accompany it. We are going to welcome people on behalf of our church, and let them know that they are welcome here in the church as well. Can you believe it? Crazy eh, that our liberal protestant church is going to go knocking on doors?! But it'll be a light touch with baked goods and information about the town and a simple welcome. "We're your neighbors, let us know if you need anything", sort of thing.

It pushes the edge of my comfort zone, honestly, cause I don't want us to come across as proselytizing and yet here's the thing. We have a lovely community here, some really good things that happen within our church, a lot of love to share, a Christian community that is not condemning of homosexuals or

disparaging of other faiths, that takes earth care seriously, that loves the arts, that offers community to children and youth, where justice is important, and so on and so forth. So who are we not to reach out to new-comers in town with an invitation to this beautiful church community? Those who usually go door to door offer a different view of what it means to be Christian and their voices are often the loudest, but we have a voice to share too.

In the background, we are calling this the Marsha Lamson project because if you know anything about our beloved Marsha Lamson, who died last year, you know she loved to share things about our church with the wider town and she loved to be welcoming and loving to people, offering cards and flowers and whatever else as a gesture of care and friendship. Her husband Ted encouraged us to use some of the money that came into the church in honor of her for this purpose. The Marsha Lamson Welcome Home project.

And what we hope to find is someone, some family, some couple, who because of our welcome might just find a house of belonging here, someone who never would have thought of it or come otherwise. And if that happens with just one person I think the effort would have been worth it cause we have a beautiful house of belonging here and we ought to share it.

So let me know if this floats your boat and you'd like to welcome some of your new neighbors – we're looking for people who live near those who have just come to town - but if that's too far out of your comfort zone I still invite you this morning to note how important this human need to belong is, how important it is in your own life and how important it is to every other life you encounter. Consider how in your circles and in your day to day life you might foster a sense of belonging for others, remembering how surprised you might be at who among

you doesn't feel like they belong. Notice those who do not fit in, create for some mis-fit some space of fitting where they too can belong, for this we know is what is important to God and what God calls us to, what God's justice looks like, the shape of heaven's walls, the contours of the holy temple where "wisdom and righteousness, justice and holiness, join at the feet of God." Amen.