

The Fourth Sunday of Easter C 2022
May 8, 2022
John 10:22-30, Acts 9:36-43
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

“You belong here....” The sign on the doors of Gethsemane Lutheran Church literally stopped us in our tracks. My two colleagues and I stood there on the walkway for a moment, allowing the words roll off our tongues, savoring them: “You belong here....” “Whoa! That’s good. That’s really good!” said one of my fellow pastors. “Yeah,” said the second. “That’s way better than ‘all are welcome,’ which as we know, isn’t always the truth!” I nodded and said, “Yeah, I know what you mean. ‘All are welcome’ often translates to ‘You’re welcome to come in, if you play by our rules and don’t rock the boat and make waves...” My friends nodded, and as we stepped through the doorway to enter the 2018 Oregon Synod Assembly, one of them said, “I’m going to adopt that sign and take it back to my congregation!...”

“You belong here....” When you stop and think about it, that’s the message all congregations should be proclaiming. “You belong here” -- not just as a silent observer who sits on the sidelines and occasionally gets to applaud what the existing leadership is doing; rather, you belong here as a full-fledged, fully participating member of the Body of Christ with a seat at the table and a voice that contributes to the mission and ministry of Christ’s Church.

Perhaps it will help to step back and look at it this way: The fact that you and I are here today as worshiping members of this congregation is proof that we’ve heard the voice of the Good Shepherd and that we belong to him. Only those who belong to his flock can hear his voice inviting us to believe in the promise of abundant life that comes through abiding in relationship with God. As Jesus himself declares, “My sheep know my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand....”¹

“You belong here.” I wonder if you and I can even begin to grasp how healing, how empowering that statement is for those who’ve been given the message – spoken and unspoken – that they don’t belong?... “You belong here.” Yes, you, the one who at this very moment is questioning and struggling to believe.... You, the one who’s lonely and grieving and doesn’t want anyone else to see your pain -- you belong here because Jesus sees your pain, and he says, “You belong to me. No one will snatch you out of my hand, and nothing can ever separate you from my love....” And you, the one who feels unworthy because others have shamed you and caused you to feel that way – you belong here!... So do you, the one dubbed “black sheep” by your family because of something you’ve done or something you’ve failed to do. You belong here because the Good Shepherd says, “Don’t worry about what anyone else says because their word doesn’t matter. I am the Word that gives life to the whole world, and I say, ‘You are loved, and you belong to me. Forever!’”

Friends, you and I are here today because we belong to Jesus, and somewhere along the way we heard his voice calling us to follow him. Our Good Shepherd counts us among his sheep, but he’s also made it very clear that we’re not the only ones who count. Earlier in chapter 10 of John’s gospel Jesus declares, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd.”² Let’s sit with that a moment and

¹ John 10:27-28.

² John 10:16.

let it sink in.... Jesus wants to bring others into his fold, AND he also tells us earlier in chapter 10 that he himself is the gate for the sheep. So, this means that you and I don't get to be the gatekeepers who determine who's in and who's out. Only Jesus gets to do that! Now, that's some serious good news!... It's also good news that belonging leads to believing – and not vice versa. This is something I think too many Christians get wrong, and I'm sad to say that historically the church hasn't been very helpful on this point. Too often church leaders have proclaimed that we have to believe “the right things,” jump through a few flaming hoops, and scale the extension ladder of righteousness in order to be acceptable to God. But in today's gospel reading, Jesus tells the Jewish leaders – and us – that this is backwards. To reiterate, Jesus says that only those who belong to him can hear his voice. And only those who hear his voice will accept his invitation to follow in the way that will lead them to believe in the gracious God he has come to reveal.

So, it's not our job to be gatekeepers. But as we heard in last week's gospel reading, it is our job to join Jesus in shepherding the members of his flock – and that includes both those who are already in the fold and those who, for various reasons, remain outside of it. Jesus' commissioning of Peter is also our commissioning: As disciples of Jesus, we, too, are called to feed and care for the sheep of his' flock – especially those who are most vulnerable. And I think we all know there are vulnerable members inside the fold, as well as outside.

Here I'd like to lift up the remarkable story of Tabitha we just heard in the reading from Acts 9. Now, we don't know a lot about Tabitha, but what we do know speaks volumes. Luke tells us she's a disciple who is “devoted to good works and acts of charity.”³ She's also known by the Greek name “Dorcas.” The fact that she has two names may indicate she's bilingual; it may also indicate that she's someone who's able to stand in the tense gap between the Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians and the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians who've recently returned to Jerusalem after being scattered abroad. In any case, when Tabitha dies, it's immediately obvious that people love her dearly. Indeed, her loss is a tremendous blow to some of the most vulnerable members of the community: namely, the widows, who gather beside Peter at the deathbed of their beloved Dorcas – for that's the name by which they know her. The widows weep and show Peter the tunics and other clothing Dorcas has so lovingly made for them.... But this outpouring of grief clearly isn't about clothing; it's about the way Dorcas has cared for their well-being, providing them with garments to keep them warm and to adorn their bodies with beauty. Professor Matt Skinner of Luther Seminary observes that in a very real sense Tabitha/Dorcas is holding the fledgling church together by making sure the people who come into the church find security and connection there....⁴ Helping people feel safe and connected within the church – helping them know they belong here – is what discipleship looks like!

You know, I've thought about Tabitha quite a bit this past week or so. I thought about her when I went to visit Doris Eide last Sunday. Dear sweet-as-pie, sharp-as-a-tack, almost-ninety-seven-year-old Doris! When I called to ask, “Is it okay for me to come over?” she said, “Oh yes – if you'll excuse my mess on the kitchen counter....” I chuckled and said, “Let me guess: I suspect your ‘mess’ involves quilt blocks for the Sewing Circle?” Then it was her turn to chuckle, as she acknowledged that she has to keep busy!... And just so you know, when I got to her house, there was no mess! There was a very tidy pile of quilt blocks perched on the kitchen counter next to a sewing machine and an iron!... I thought about Tabitha on Wednesday morning, when I heard the voices of some of our Sewing Circle members drifting in through the office door. I smiled to myself as I thought about how they're like

³ Luk e9:36b.

⁴ Matt Skinner, Sermon Brainwave podcast # 843: The Fourth Sunday of Easter (C), 8 May 2022, www.workingpreacher.org.

Tabitha's circle: a circle of women, including several new widows, who are tending and mending the broken hearts of their sisters, while also creating gifts of warmth and beauty for others.... Tabitha sprang to mind again later that same afternoon when I looked out my office window and saw Marilyn Wichman getting out of her car with fabric in hand. Marilyn does work for the Sewing Circle at home and regularly stops by the church to swap what she's finished for a new project.... I also thought about Tabitha on Thursday afternoon when I called Marie Rothi to see how her recovery from COVID was progressing. We chatted for a few minutes and then Marie said she was thinking about doing some sewing. This made me smile because then I knew she was feeling better!... I also thought about Tabitha and her legacy yesterday when I made a trip to St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Beaverton to drop off ten quilts our Sewing Circle is donating to Lutheran World Relief. As I watched the volunteers pack Zoar's colorful quilts and load them into the truck along with quilts from congregations throughout the Oregon Synod, I wondered where all these quilts might go. Perhaps they'll go to refugees from Ukraine or Afghanistan. There's no way to know, but wherever they go, I'm confident they'll bring much-needed comfort and joy to those who receive them. I also thought about Tabitha as I recalled the joy of seeing last year's high school graduates, Kyler Shearer and Raquel Robles, wrapped in quilts made by the members of our Sewing Circle. And then I thought about the ten beautiful quilts they donated for guests to Zoar's emergency weather shelter – and about their pledge to replenish the supply in the future! Wow! Such an abundance is a sure sign of Jesus' love working in and through his disciples... And then my heart filled to overflowing, as I remembered that on June 6, three weeks from tomorrow, our quilters will gather to share lunch and swap stories with staff from Clackamas County Children's Services, as they deliver dozens more quilts, stuffed animals, and hats for some of Jesus' most vulnerable lambs: children who've been taken into foster care with little or nothing to call their own.... My friends, like the garments made by Tabitha, every one of these quilts has been created with love. These faithful disciples who contribute their gifts both at home and here at Zoar are doing their part to care for the well-being of Jesus' lambs – including both those who are inside the fold, and those who remain outside.... Thank you, dear Sewing Circle members, for tending Jesus' flock.... And thank you to all of Zoar's ministry team members! You're an incredibly servant-hearted group of disciples, who are generously sharing your gifts to let our neighbors in need know that they are loved and that they belong. May God bless you, so that you may continue to be a blessing to so many!

Let us pray.

Good Shepherd,
tune our hearts
to hear your voice.
Hold us fiercely
in your tender hand
and in your steadfast promise
that will never let us go.
Root us in a deep sense
of belonging and belovedness,
so that we may grow in faith,
and inspire us to be like Tabitha:
creating and sharing gifts
of warmth, beauty, and welcome
with all who are longing to know Christ
and the abundant life that is in him. Amen.