

**“Belonging”**  
a sermon  
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John 10:22–30

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I’ve been thinking this week about *belonging*: you know, being part of something, having a place with others, enjoying the gift of comfort and welcome from those who count you as one of them.

A great part of why I have been thinking along these lines this week, to be sure, is because of my trip to Dallas. It was a wonderful reminder that I *belong* in several ways, in several spheres, some of them overlapping, some of them not at all.

Think with me, for a moment, of the different places where you belong, the different groups to which you belong.

There are the substantive:

- family
- church
- job
- school
- clubs musical and athletic

and there are the trivial:

- magazine and newspaper subscribers
- Facebook
- cheese of the month club
- ... whatever ...

These all entail some sort of belonging, and in their varied configurations of membership obligations and opportunities the shape of our lives and the use of our time is delineated. In them, we find meaning and we seek purpose. Without them, our lives would be different, perhaps less burdened, or maybe less meaningful, but different all the same.

For we are unavoidably creatures who need to belong, and seek that belonging almost as earnestly as we seek the basics of life: food, water, air.

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There is another reason why I’ve been thinking about this whole matter of belonging. It is because of the Bible passage that I read a few minutes ago, a passage that I’ve been living with all week as I made these enjoyable and multiple transitions from one sphere of belonging to another.

For this passage is, I believe, about belonging, and so it resonates with that need of and love for belonging that we all have.

In that passage, Jesus is being questioned, again, by those who really would like to be rid of him. “Why do you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us!” But the questions aren’t sincere. They are asked, as are most of their questions, with an edge to them, devious questions designed to trick and trap and thereby bring down Jesus.

Jesus knows this, so he doesn’t answer their question directly. (Have you ever noticed that Jesus hardly *ever* answers a question directly?) Here, Jesus more or less rejects the question: “I have already told you, and you did not believe me.”

Then he points them to where they might find an answer to their question: he points them to what he has done, to his “works.” That should be all the answer they need, all the proof and confirmation for their insincere question, were it sincere. “The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me,” Jesus tells them. The works — his teaching, his healing; the miracles, the signs; authority and certainty that clearly come from beyond — all of these should be all that they need to hear the truth.

And yet, they do not. For all this, Jesus points out, they still are not satisfied, and they still do not hear the truth nor recognize it, the truth that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the promised One.

Why is that? Why do they not hear? Why do they not understand, accept, follow, believe?

Jesus tells them why.

“But you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.”

That’s why, Jesus tells them. They do not believe, because they do not belong. That’s right. They do not belong, to the sheep, to those who have been given to the Shepherd by the Father. They are not among the sheep, so they neither hear nor recognize the Shepherd’s voice. Jesus is the Shepherd, the *Good* Shepherd. He calls his sheep. He gathers them. He protects them. He is able to do this because the sheep have been given to him by the Father, and because he and the Father are united in what they will and desire and intend and thus, in the end, accomplish.

This, in case we hadn’t noticed it, is a very different kind of belonging, unlike the other kinds of belonging that comprise our lives and fill our sense of what it means to belong. For with all those others, we belong to a group in the sense that we belong *in* it, while still being free and independent *over against* it.

But with the Shepherd and the sheep, things are very different. Here, we’re talking about belonging to *someone*. And this we don’t understand, or, if we understand it, we are inclined to reject it. For the notion of belonging to another person, as their servant, their underling, their slave, their possession, . . . their sheep — this is unacceptable to us.

But that is how things are for Christians. If you truly are a Christian, if you truly are a follower of Jesus, then you do not belong to yourself; you belong to Christ. And that is a very difficult notion to accept for us whose highest values are freedom, independence, and equality.

And yet, that is precisely what this “belonging” means, the kind of belonging Jesus describes as characterizing the relationship between him and his followers. If you are truly a follower of Jesus, then you belong to Jesus. And if you belong to Jesus, then you do not belong to yourself. Your decisions are not to be made simply for yourself and out of your own desires and preferences. They are to be made for the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd — arising from and directed toward him. What you value is to come not solely

or even mainly from your own needs and wants, from your own limited perspective and your own supersized ego. It's to come from the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd. When you belong to Jesus, you are not your own; you belong to him.

To belong to someone, to belong to another, is clearly not a desirable thing, usually, in virtually all circumstances of our lives. Slavery of human beings, the denial of freedom wherever it occurs, clearly these are evils that it is right to eradicate. To say that you belong to another person goes against our deep-seated and proper belief in the dignity of each human being.

But with *this* belonging, we're talking about Jesus. And Jesus is not simply any old person. As Jesus said, he and the Father are one. There is no proper distinction between what Jesus desires and what God desires, between the will of one and the will of the other, between the status or goodness or holiness of one over against the other.

It was this assertion that really made things unacceptable for those tricky questioners of Jesus. It was offensive to them, this idea that Jesus and the Father were one. So, too, was this notion that depended on it, that the followers of Jesus belong to him, as sheep to a shepherd. They were deeply offended, disturbed way down in their bones by this message, driven to anger by it.

In our day, the offense may not be as great, nor may it be religiously based, as it was for Jesus' opponents. Even so, in our day, the offense is still there. That Christians would understand themselves as belonging to Jesus is considered very strange. That Christians would submit their will, their identity, to the Lord Jesus — you know this — it gives some the willies.

And to be honest, some of us are among them. We resist the belonging. We want to be Christians without the submission, without the self-denial, without the losing who we have decided we are. When it comes down to it, we really can't understand why one would deny oneself for Christ.

But, again, we're talking about Jesus, here. Because of this,  
when you belong to Jesus, you truly *belong*.  
When you belong to Jesus, you are truly free.  
When you belong to Jesus, you are comforted.  
When you belong to Jesus, you are recreated for a greater purpose.  
When you belong to Jesus, you're given a taste of heaven, a sense of  
eternity.

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Such is what it means to belong to Jesus, the Good Shepherd. The sheep know the Shepherd. They hear his voice, and follow, because they know his voice.

And so it seems to me that we are posed an important question this morning: *Do we know his voice? Do we know the voice of the Shepherd, the voice of the Lord Jesus, so that, when we hear it, we will follow?*

I can't answer that question for you. You must answer it yourself. But I can assure you that, for many Christians, we would say that we are in the *process* of learning the voice. We are learning, or trying to learn, so that we may hear him when he speaks.

Of course, there are barriers to this learning. We get distracted. We get impatient. We take shortcuts. We forget. We get in the way. There is no lack of obstacles to learning the Lord's voice, and we tend to exploit them all.

Here's the thing.

We can't learn his voice if we won't listen.

We can't learn his voice if we don't seek to hear it in scripture.

We can't learn his voice if to us the Bible is unknown and worship is unfamiliar.

And having learned it,

we can't hear it if we don't shut up and listen.

We can't hear it if we don't stop saying what's on our mind long enough to find out what's on *his*.

We can't hear it if we continue to insist on going in our own direction rather than being led the way by him.

What I am getting at is, quite simply, this: Are you reading the Bible, regularly? Are you in prayer, often? For it is through these that we come to learn the Shepherd's voice. These are his gifts to you for developing the hearing that marks those who belong to him.

And so I challenge you, as I challenge myself: build into your days some regular time opening up that Bible; set some time — at sunup, or sundown, or somewhere in between — not only to speak with God, but to listen for God.

Do these things, I urge you. For in doing them you will likely come to learn that you belong.