BELONGING
A Lenten Devotional
March 2-April 14, 2022

Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Ave | Minneapolis, MN
westminstempls.org
Genetic Composition, by Robyn Awend, letterpress, 2005
Dear friends,

Last fall at Westminster we were starting to inch our way out of the Covid pandemic, but the ensuing months brought increased sickness and death – resulting in more isolation and anxiety. We could not gather in person as we had hoped.

And last fall we had hardly begun to address the other longer, more challenging illness among us: the distortion and destruction of human community caused by our unrelenting “otherizing” of our neighbor. Whether in the racism of our culture, our tendency to look askance at those who disagree with us, our fear of those different from us, or our rejection of those whose language or nation of origin or story are not like our own, we have succumbed to a pandemic of the other.

When we look around and see everyone as “other,” and when we cannot be together in person, it is hard to know to whom we belong. In the hope of countering that reality, we chose to center our worship of God through this season on Belonging.

In this Lenten booklet Westminster members share personal reflections on belonging. Here we find a wonderful variety of thoughts, prayers, poems, images, and stories that express what it means to belong to one another. A church is a collection of individuals who know that to follow Jesus means to belong to a community that worships, prays, sings, grieves, serves, learns, and listens together – that is, a gathering of lives that belong together by the power of God’s love.

I am grateful to Heather Heefner and the team that has assembled this Lenten resource. I pray you will find it to be a source of reflection and hope during these 40 days.

See you in church – in person or online.

Grace and peace,

Timothy Hart-Andersen
Senior Pastor
The First Thing We Touch, by James Nutt, watercolor and ink on paper, 2018
Dear Westminster Community,

We invite you to read the 2022 Lent Devotional about Belonging. This is an imperative topic in such a time as this. Our current surgeon general of the United States, Vivek Murthy, MD, has named a “loneliness epidemic” in America. How do we wrestle with belonging within the culture of loneliness? Does loneliness contribute to what Tim discusses in his introduction on ‘other-ing’ our neighbor? Does this create more loneliness?

Over these next 40 days of Holy Lent, the authors of this devotional will take you on a journey of belonging. You will hear thoughtful questions, somber reflections, heartfelt longings, and inspired praises. Our community vulnerably wrestles with belonging to God, belonging to each other, belonging to nature, belonging to Jesus, and belonging to community. This is an invitation to listen to the sacred that is in the silence of belonging. All are welcome.

I am grateful to the Prayer Ministry team for leading this sacred project, the Rev. David Shinn for being our pastoral advisor, Dr. Rodney Allen Schwartz for helping choose and photograph art from the Westminster collection, and to the bright and thoughtful editorial team who worked on the project. A profound thank you to the community members who contributed to the sensitive, spiritual, and beautifully written entries. This book is a window into your hearts, minds, and prayers. Thank you for courageously sharing and thus creating belonging.

Grace and Peace,
Heather Heefner

Lenten Book 2022 Editorial Team
Heather Heefner
Sara Donaldson
Lucy Quaintance
Susan Dray
Scott Appelwick
HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING?

Lenten booklets, in which we share our stories with each other, bring us together in new and powerful ways. We have renewed experiences of belonging when we read Westminster booklets from the past and now, as a congregation, we are taking part in a traditional Christian practice.

Often when we feel alone, we reach for an encouraging author or poet. During Lent, I have often turned to Martin Marty’s Lenten booklet, *Places Along the Way*, where he and his photographer son, Micah, offer: “One Day, One Page, One Place, One Prayer.” I open a page each morning, read the entry reflectively, gaze into the picture, say a prayer, rest a bit, and enter into my day.

Hymns can become a prayer of memory and create a sense of belonging. The words of a favorite hymn, about Jesus calling Peter, Andrew, James and John to him, have become for me a prayer and a comfort:

“Lord, you have come to the lakeshore ...
with your eyes you have searched me,
And while smiling, have spoken my name.
... my loving friend, as thus you call me.”

When I sometimes wonder how do I still belong, especially when in-person gatherings can be hard, the words of *The Servant Song* can become a sung prayer, and can help dispense my doubt.

“We are pilgrims on the journey, we are travelers on the road;
We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.
I will hold the Christ-light for you in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.”

Alone with readings or in sung prayer with our Lord, we belong. We are not alone.

*Marilyn Youel*
Early on, in my college years, I felt spiritually unanchored, isolated, and lonely. The rote faith of my devout Catholicism had failed me. Or had I failed it? I prayed as intensely as I knew how, particularly when fasting in Lent. It was my time in the desert, to understand who I was and who was I supposed to be. Over time, I grew tired of others’ words and just sat in the chapel. No words. I had stumbled upon meditation.

Early on, with Jesuit tutelage, my busy practice borrowed much from the Christian Mystics, the Desert Fathers, Rumi, Centering Prayer, and poetry. I worked hard to find the spiritual practice I knew I needed. My mentor suggested Buddhism for my required comparative religion courses. He thought the quiet reflection might suit me and I might find some of the peace and meaning I was seeking.

Over the years some of my prayer practice has taken much from Buddhism. The sparest form. No chanting and no mantra. Just listening to my breathing and paying attention. It complements my spoken prayer.

My meditation practice, originally undertaken decades ago to find peace, quiet and separation, surprisingly has led me to something else entirely.

In the quiet, listening and paying attention, I find myself profoundly connected to all that is, ever was, and ever will be. Inside or outside, in a church, in an airport, on the beach, gazing at the stars, alone, in a group, neck deep in a lake, walking in the woods, kissing my wife, everywhere, and anywhere, I am connected to it all. Is this what God is? Everything. Is this what I belong to? Everything and everyone.

In some intentionally quiet moments, I am overcome with the joy of just being. Is this what love is? Being, belonging, not separated, and impossible to be separated from God.

If I just let it be, there it is.

*Rob Carlson*
WE ARE NOT OUR OWN: WE BELONG TO GOD

Belonging – it’s a rich, wonderful word, and it has a rich, wonderful double meaning. It can mean “being a part of,” and it can mean “being owned by” or “under the control of.” For me, at least, it feels important to acknowledge both senses of that word, especially during Lent. And it seems important to start with that second meaning, being owned or controlled by.

One of my favorite theologians, John Calvin, puts it this way. “We are not our own.” Rather, “We are God’s.” That is, we belong to God; we are God’s own.

Isn’t that very close to what Paul has in mind when he writes, over and over, urging us to “belong to Christ”? He does this twice each in his letters to the Christians in Rome (Rom 1:6 and 7:4), Corinth (1 Cor. 3:23 and 15:23), and Galatia (Gal 3:29 and 5:24).

And that last verse brings me back to Lent, a time for fasting and sacrifice. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus,” Paul writes, “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” These words come immediately after Paul has named the fruit of the Spirit, including the “love, joy, peace, and patience” we all long for.

What passions and desires am I being called to give up, to crucify, during Lent 2022, so that I may fully, truly “belong to Christ”? For me, right now as I write, I know I need to give up anxiety, give up the crippling sense that I’m not doing enough. And listen. Listen for that still small voice. And trust. And then act.

Yes, these are dark times. And, still, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not [does not, will not] overcome it.” (John 1:5)

Chad Quaintance
BELONGING AND TROUBLED WATERS

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When “you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you…. Isaiah 43: 1-2a

I wonder whether we are most likely to lose hold of our sense of belonging to God when we are navigating through trouble. When trouble arises, we can feel alone and separated from God. Historian Kate Bowler writes compellingly about the thread in American Christianity seeking to convince us we will avoid trouble because we believe in God. Until we unravel this erroneous idea, we will consider encounters with trouble to be a sign we have lost our connection to God. This idea is subtly woven into the fabric of our faith, so even as we readily express in word and song our confidence that God is with us, encountering trouble causes us to imagine otherwise. God’s never-ending love is the foundation of God claiming us as God’s own. God’s love outlasts every form of trouble. We suffer needlessly when we imagine that the presence of trouble means we do not belong to God.

Proposing we cultivate unassailable confidence that we belong to God should not encourage us to spiritualize trouble or seek it out. Nor is it permission to idealize the troubles burdening our neighbors. Too many of God’s people, because of unjust social and political systems, face devastating and unrelenting trouble. Far from spiritualizing or idealizing, remembering that we belong to God is the grounding we need for responding to trouble—our own and our neighbors’. Instead of questioning whether we still belong to God we will ask fruitful questions such as: What responses to this present trouble are rooted in knowing we belong to God?

To the ones who read this now and feel overwhelmed by trouble, please do not fear, for God has redeemed you, and called you by name. You belong to God.

The Rev. Alanna Simone Tyler
See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. (John 3:1)
BROODING LENT

Explore with me what “belonging in the silence of Lent” may mean. Let three scriptural phrases come into mind.

The first is spoken by Ruth to her mother-in-law Naomi. I still hear this in the elegance of the King James Version: “...whither thou goest, I will go...” (Ruth 1:16) This is the practical language of belonging, covenant, and promise. The surrounding text reveals the focus on relational bonds, or the grounds of our having a place for a lifetime. Yet what arises for us from the story is also a sense of calling. Ruth declares her destiny to be with Naomi in Bethlehem, Judah.

The second, I find most emphatically stated in Mark, “The Spirit immediately drove him [Jesus] out into the wilderness.” (1:12) Here, the language of calling — leading or drive — is in dynamic, paradoxical relation to silence, or what is not said, and perhaps even what cannot be said. We speak of this as “grace under pressure.” For, in the silence of this, in Lent, we must listen for what is at stake in belonging at all.

In the now-shared silence of Lent, come, listen to the third phrase: “My Father is working still, and I am working.” (John 5:17) What is this work, or working? Do we, too, belong in, or to this work? In other words, does the work of God, through Jesus, belong to us, in Spirit? (And vice versa, layering this upon the Markan phrase: In Spirit, do we so stand in the work of God through Jesus?)

I sense as I brood, with Ruth and with the dynamics of our Covenantal Call, that we, too, face a belonging to where we do not belong. Yet are also in a place where we can know more of what it means to belong than we can tell.

Amen. Let us give God thanks and praise in language and in silence for the good work we are given to do.

The Rev. Duane A. Lookingbill
A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

The mournful song of the white-throated sparrow from the deep forests has always accompanied my life. Its signature, simple call at dawn or dusk, or on a cloudy day, or to warn of an impending storm, or to broadcast the All Clear after that storm has passed, is one higher note, followed by three to four trailing notes low, or, on occasion, reversed in order. “All is well.” “All will be well,” it reassures me. Those I have introduced to Minnesota’s and Canada’s canoe countries, or to the sparkling streams along the North Shore, have been taught to recognize that small bird’s plaintive call. I have heard it thousands and thousands of times. But I had never actually seen the hidden sparrow that emits that soulful song. Yet it speaks to me. And I know that it is there. For me.

“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord.’”
(Isaiah 40:3)

Stephen Snyder
FROM ALIENATION TO BELONGING

Groucho Marx famously said, “I wouldn’t belong to a club that would have me as a member.”

For much of my life, this view fairly summed up my feelings about belonging. I was an Individual, with a capital “I”. What use or need did I have to belong?

This all changed when I met my future spouse, who insisted that I join the church and profess my faith publicly. Naturally, I resisted at first. Fast forward, and now I am a member of Westminster, and a Deacon no less. Celebrating the essential joy, or rather, the need of belonging. How did this happen?

There was no “road to Damascus” epiphany. Neither did a good shepherd come calling. Rather, it began with a gnawing feeling that I was missing out. This occurred in Israel, of all places, while I was living and working on a kibbutz; one of three gentiles among a close-knit community of several hundred souls. It was then and there that I felt the need to belong, and I understood what it meant to belong to God.

My path to “the beloved community” began cautiously. Attending church was fine, but joining? No thanks. A public profession of faith? Well, alright. After that, it was a blur – I was in deep. This new identity – Christian, Presbyterian, God’s own, was first and foremost an awareness that, contrary to earlier denials, I did in fact, belong and the choice was never really mine. That realization was transformational. Belonging is not limited. We all belong to God. Even grouchy guys like me.

Brian Utley
WESTMINSTER’S MINISTRY OF BELONGINGNESS

The psychologist Abraham Maslow identified belongingness – our emotional need for “interpersonal relationships, affiliating, connectedness, and being part of a group” – as a need that we must fulfill before we can realize our full potential.

Westminster was the first place in Minneapolis to meet my need to belong when I moved here in 1986. Since then, Westminster has ministered to my need to belong. I am grateful for this ministry.

Westminster’s ministry of belongingness exists in the building itself. The sanctuary design gives us the feeling of being surrounded by others. I most strongly feel belongingness at Westminster when we say the Lord’s Prayer together in the 10:30 am Sunday service. Sitting in my balcony seat with my eyes closed, it feels like the unison voices are around me on all sides, reciting a prayer we all know. At the most challenging times, that routine experience comforts me.

Where do I belong in the Minneapolis community as an African American professional in the new post-President Trump, post-George Floyd world? Is Westminster the right place for me to belong? I believe that I will still belong at Westminster in 2026 as I did in 1986. Sometimes, however, I fear being left behind in times of rapid and substantial change. Because we have changed and I have changed, this belonging may look different.

Lent reminds us that although our need for belongingness is variable, God’s ability to meet our need is constant. Ash Wednesday reminds us of our mortality, yet our pastors say these words at every memorial service: “in life, in death, in life beyond death we belong to God.”

Easter Sunday confirms this. When our organist plays Westminster’s traditional Easter Sunday postlude (Toccata from Symphony No. 5 by Charles-Marie Widor), I’ll stay seated and listen to the entire piece. I’ll see other long-time Westminster members doing the same. In that moment, I will know that I belong.

Vince Thomas
HOW DO I BELONG?

Norman – Mary Ellen – Leslie – Lynn – Jeff – Jim

I finally get my own room. My mom says what color would you like? Kelly green it is.

Scott and Jimmy and Bob at my birthday party. They parade me around on their shoulders after I win the archery competition.

Paul flings linguini against the wall. I’m not going to clean it up. I can’t stand it – I am going to clean it up. The audience in the small London theater erupts in laughter.

Twenty-nine toga-clad university students cram into a Tianjin dorm room at the end of our stay. The music is loud. Our Chinese hosts say nothing but must think we’re crazy.

The chairs are arranged in a circle in the Brooklyn apartment. We are meeting to discuss what to do about our landlord. My future wife is there.

Hundreds of aspiring architects are hunkered over their tables at the Jacob Javits Center for 12 hours. Smiles all around when we turn in our drawings. Pass or fail – we did this.

We discuss and pray about what we believe – we are a group of men at Presbyterian Clearwater Forest on a chilly fall evening. Bill’s homemade pizza and David’s salmon helps.

Susan – Marion – Michaela – Jim

I’m lying on the dock at the cabin on a clear summer night looking up at the incredible vastness of the universe. I am very, very small. Yet I belong to it. I belong to all of it.

Jim Tucker
The concept of belonging has been front and center the past three years as my husband and I have discerned whether to leave our church home of over 30 years to join Westminster.

In Brené Brown’s book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, she writes, “Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.”

Early in our relationship around 1990, we visited a few churches in the area and became regular visitors to St. Luke’s Presbyterian. We were sincerely welcomed, and we admired the congregation’s commitment to social justice. Since we were new to the denomination, we didn’t know that leadership positions such as elders and deacons in the local congregation are ordained positions. While this congregation would have supported us becoming ordained into leadership positions, the polity of the PC(USA) at that time did not allow ordination of gay members, thereby preventing us from full participation in the life of the congregation. That was deemed unacceptable to us and so we moved on. Restating Brené Brown, “fitting in and seeking approval are hollow substitutes for belonging.”

Thirty years passed and we found ourselves wanting to explore making a change. We were drawn to Westminster’s Wednesday evening contemplative service. This was our entry point. From there we became regular visitors to the 10:30 am Sunday worship service and learned about the numerous ways we could nurture and live out our faith at Westminster. We know we are welcome here and with changes in the PC(USA) polity, we are now able to bring our whole authentic selves to Westminster and fully participate in the life of this congregation. It is now our new spiritual home, where we Belong.

Thanks be to God.

*Scott Appelwick*
BELONGING IN THE SILENCE OF LENT (PSALM 46)

While I often experience God’s presence in the many wonders of creation, including the gifts of so many in our community locally and sometimes far beyond, one of the best guides I have found to enhancing and building on community relationships and my understanding of our relationship with creation is the book of Psalms. Psalm 46 stands out in the Silence of Lent. “Be still and know that I am God” (verse 10). Taking time to step back and listen and see how God is working in our midst, and what God may be telling us is helpful for me. “God is in the midst of the city, it shall not be moved” (verse 5) reminds me of the vast resources in our midst and God’s presence to guide us in building stronger community in our city. I think especially of the many resources our Social Justice team regularly uncovers when building out the Social Justice Forums. God seems very present in the midst of these rich resources and our community conversations. As we continue in our Lenten journey, there is also reassurance: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help ... ”(verse 1).

Phil Asgian
Sunday, March 13

_The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it._
(Psalm 24:1)
BEING AND BELONGING

I sit alone in solitude on my rocking chair to meditate. I notice my inner stirrings.

I gently close my eyes and breathe out, feeling the flow of air expel out my nostrils. I pause. I breathe in feeling the inward flow of sensation, there too a rhythmic pattern.

The ebb and flow of my breath reminds me of my goodness that I am alive and in connection to all creation: the cycles of the seasons, the flow of the time, the waxing and waning of the moon, the sunflowers following the sun from dawn to dusk.

My mind wanders to these wonderings. I refocus to my breath again – massaging my nose with each inhale and exhale.

My body begins to relax. I can feel tension release on every exhale. I am pleased with this and ask myself, “Why don’t I do this more often?”

I notice my mind has wandered off my breath again. I nonjudgmentally and gently take myself by the hand and refocus on my breath.

All creation is breathing with me. I belong. I am.

I listen to sounds in the environment – the ticking of the clock, cars, the refrigerator. I breathe with them and through them, and other thoughts come to my mind – planning my day thoughts, worry thoughts of approaching deadlines, thoughts of grief.

And I have an antsy urge to go about my day.

I take that as a thought as well – reminding myself to stay with my breathing a few moments more.

Then, opening my eyes, I feel renewed. I note my meditation practice as a “pixel moment” in the Grand Song of Life, a round such as “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”, and I am existing somewhere “in the middle.” I do not live my life alone, for we’re all this song together.

Donna Draves
...I WILL NOT KEEP SILENT... (ISAIAH 62:1)

I will not keep silent. Who is speaking here and what is the message?

Hebrew Studies professor Anateha Portier-Young suggests that there are two ways to read this passage. Some would say that Isaiah speaks in the voice of God, vowing God’s unceasing speaking and acting on behalf of God’s beloved city and its inhabitants. Such persistence elicits hope and certainty in the listeners.

Others would believe that the prophet does not speak in God’s voice, but instead vows to act as intercessor for Jerusalem. Similar to the sentinels in Isaiah 62:6-7, the prophet stands on the city walls and breaks the silence day and night in order to make God remember God’s promise to restore Jerusalem and its inhabitants as a holy mountain, a crown of glory, and a song to praise God.

Which interpretation do you think speaks to you today? Is it Isaiah as God’s voice or Isaiah as an intercessor for Jerusalem? For me, it is the latter at such a time as this when shadows and shades of humanity seem to overtake the light of God’s love in us. Considering all the headlines we can read from our devices, we are invited to be sentinels of intercession for prayers and actions. While we pause and are silent before God in this Lenten time, we cannot be silent in our advocacy. In our commitment, we respond to the call for participating in God’s work: for all people to be restored, to proclaim the good news to the poor, to recovery of sight for the blind, to set the captives free, and to proclaim God’s favor for all people and creation.

Let us call on God because God has already promised this goodness to all of us.

The Rev. David Tsai Shinn
THE LONGING TO BE

Belonging.
To belong is to fit in,
For you and me
to feel loved, accepted,
A part of something

Change.
The builder & breaker of belonging
Sometimes,
You and me are afraid of change,
Of growth.
Why?

Longing.
You and me
Have a need to want
To be loved

To be.
To have a sense of self,
To feel a part of a place,
Situation, or person

Belonging.
You and me
Have a longing to be

Ana Weller
LET US PRAY

Even now
we hide
behind
walls of
a temple.
Jesus is outside, tipping over tables of our
wares; our gluttony, our self-absorption.

Look to
the crack
in the wall
and see
liberation’s
beginnings,
even
before
the storm
abates.

Sheila Martin
IN THE ONE’S HANDS

Through Christ, it is revealed,
In our longing for the One,
That we belong to each other
Since being first begun.

The wind dances in the Mother’s palms,
Lifting the hawk to new heights.
So too we are cradled by Her,
The breath that sustains our being, this very life.

Love is a candle that never flickers,
It is passed from heart to heart,
Our separate forms are tricksters,
We forget that in Christ
We are never truly apart.

To offer ourselves fully,
in service of love,
Is to insulate with kindness,
Warming God’s hand
As a snuggly fitting glove.

Belonging is an exploration,
of our needs within and without.
Beloved community as support to curiosity,
Even as we mill about.

To feel lost
Is to know there is a path,
a healing journey home.
Christ’s love tenderly
Singing from the mountain
“You have never been alone!”

Evan Digman
WE ARE CHOSEN TO BELONG

I had a strange dream the first night of our BWCA canoe trip. I was peering into the dark waters when all the rocks turned into turtles and crawled up out of the lake. At first, I was afraid, I did not understand my dream.

We sure noticed a lot of turtles on this canoe trip. I felt these turtles were watching us more intently than we were watching them. It was like God was watching over us through turtle eyes.

I got up early one morning. The lake was completely shrouded in fog. I shivered as I left the warmth of my sleeping bag. I sat down in the warm sun to watch the creation of a new day.

I looked down into the water to see a large snapping turtle slowly making her way along the shore towards me. She stopped in the water right beneath where I was sitting and looked up at me.

Incredibly, she climbed out of the water and up the rock face toward me. Up the big turtle lumbered until she joined me at the top. Looking around, she dug a hole in the dirt, laid her eggs, and buried them before returning to the water’s safety.

Why did this turtle lay her eggs within arm’s reach of me? She trusted me. I felt her specifically search me out. Had she seen me in her dreams like I had seen her in mine? At that moment I felt a powerful sense of belonging, that I was one with creation, that I was loved.

I now understand my dream. The Turtle is one of my Spirit Guides. There are lessons to be learned from all Creation if we take the time to listen. The turtle’s message is to not live in fear. It is not possible to be afraid and be alive at the same time. To overcome fear is to be alive. Do not let fear hold you back.

Doug Van Valkenburg
As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.
(John 17:9)
A PRAYER FOR LENT

O God of Belonging,
You put us on the earth in harmony, and peace.
Yet we have found ways to divide ourselves into tribes,
And to threaten each other’s peace.

Help all of us - including me - to realize that we ALL belong to You,
And therefore, to each other since we are all your children.
Remind me that even those on the margins are yours,
  Those whose political or social beliefs differ from my own,
  Those who I have never liked,
  Those I have excluded from power, position, or even personhood,
  Those who I refuse to see,
  Those who make me uncomfortable,
All these and more,
May we all recognize at last that we truly are all your children,
And act like it in all that we do.

In this time of division and strife,
Be with me and remind me of your intention.
Make me that Instrument of Your Peace we sing about.

I pray that, in this Lenten time of waiting and discerning,
I will allow myself the room to examine why and how I have excluded others,
And then, to address these, both in myself, and in the systems we have built,
So that all may truly be welcomed and may belong.

Help me have the courage to examine my beliefs,
And to challenge these systems
In order to bring your Kingdom to earth at last.

May I sense my own belonging to You as well,
And to feel my love and commitment to You
And the comfort that this brings.

I pray in Your name and that of Your Son, Amen.

Susan Dray
BELONGING AND REGrets

In my seventh decade I am fully aware of the importance of belonging. The flip side is not belonging, of being on the outside looking in. I am haunted by the times when as a child I participated in the rejection of children who for no substantial reason were not accepted by other children. Shunned and sometimes taunted with cruel names and even crueler behavior—being excluded—these children did not perform well academically. Even the teachers seemed to treat these children differently. Why did I join with other children in my class in this behavior? What happened to these shunned children?

At 3 am, lying awake listing my regrets and my sins, I see their faces and am so ashamed and so sad for them that I cry. Don, Michael, Elizabeth, Beverly, Roger, John, what kept me from extending to you the one thing you wanted most in the world: acceptance. My shame about my behavior and my sadness for you are without end. I pray with all my heart that in your life you found love and acceptance. I beg for your forgiveness. And for God’s.

Anonymous
I had an interesting conversation with a church member recently around a pastor’s sense of belonging to a congregation. The person was surprised when I shared that pastors in the Presbyterian Church are not members of the churches they serve, rather they have membership in the broader realm of the local Presbytery. We belong to the Presbytery, formally, yet still have a sense of belonging, in a unique way, to the congregation. This church member found it interesting that, as the person who is oriented specifically toward helping visitors get connected to the church, and who supports new members as they find their way into the life and ministries of the church, I am encouraging something in which I cannot technically share.

When I look at Westminster’s New Member Covenant, I do find that so much of it resonates for me. It does so, not with a sense of connecting as a member of the congregation, but in how I find my belonging as one of the pastors of this church. Trusting in God’s saving grace through Jesus Christ, I commit myself to my own journey of faith as one of Westminster’s leaders. I strive to live as Christ’s faithful disciple, following his teaching and showing his love and justice. Acknowledging that all that we have is a gift from our Creator, and responding to God’s grace and love, I do my best to contribute my gifts as a faithful steward of all God has given me. I rejoice that the Holy Spirit sustains me, and all of us, in shared ministry and that I find belonging in this community!

*The Rev. Dr. Meghan Gage-Finn*

Each of the words listed above places me in a group. A category. For the most part, I embrace these categories, and I am not ashamed to use them as identities. I have even used more than one at the same time.

Some people within the generation behind mine are struggling and grappling with finding words that best describe how they define themselves. Thinking about this sometimes makes me feel sad. Why?

It seems labels have, whatever the reason, become “good”, “bad,” or whatever adjective serves our purpose at any given moment. We all label people. Myself included. We all can choose to accept or reject the labels that are given or assigned to us, but do we really need to make ourselves right by making someone else wrong?

Finally, something to ponder: When we have discussions about labels, gender, gender identity, and other related sticky topics, will we choose to begin approaching these chats with the intention of being kind, or will we continue insisting that we are right, regardless of how our position might affect others? Based on our choice, are we prepared to continue accepting extreme consequences of needing to be right?

May we begin to work as hard for peace as we do for justice.

Shalom.

John Greenwald
The place I have found the most belonging at church has been the youth group. Arriving in my freshman year, I knew a couple people, but was mostly a new kid who was semi-nervous about the new situation. After a few youth group meetings and a sweet retreat, I already felt like a huge part of the group and had a sense of belonging after just this short period. This belonging continued to grow and grow after many mission trips and many years of youth group. I feel this belonging because it is a place I know I can always show up to and be listened to and respected. This belonging has also helped me grow as a person and I am more willing to speak my mind about things I care about which I would not have done without the youth group.

Victor Heinze
SEPTEMBER 1974. FIRST WEEK AT AUGUSTANA COLLEGE.

So many choices. So much new. So many options.
Worries. Did I come to the right school? Will I fit in and make new friends? Am I taking the right classes? What am I going to do with the rest of my life?

Tuesday morning. 10:00 a.m. Chapel. This is new. Sitting in the bleachers in the back of the Chapelgymnatorium, i.e. the gym, a building which was neither attractive nor inspiring. I am thinking about my schedule for the rest of the day. What’s my next class? I am vaguely aware of an opening prayer. Song.

Wait! What is this song? This is new:
“Beautiful Savior, King of Creation, Son of God and Son of Man!
Truly I’d love thee, truly I’d serve thee, light of my soul, my joy, my crown.”

Chills are running up and down my spine. It sounds like a choir of angels (much of the College choir was likely there). This is so exciting! This tune, these words. They challenge me in a new way. Truly, do I love thee? Truly, what am I going to do to serve thee?
Voices united in praise. Pictures of heaven in my mind. Chills continue. The voices reach a crescendo:
“Glory and honor, praise adoration, now and forever more be thine.”
I feel the power of the praise. Doubts disappear. I know: Jesus, you are the light of my soul. You are my joy! I know I belong to you.

Now, 47 years later, I still feel the same chills when I hear this tune and sing those words:
“Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer, he makes my sorrowing spirit sing.”
Truly, Jesus, I love you. I know I still belong to you.

Marc Manderscheid
From the beginning, *Belonging* had a price of admission.

To belong to our family, I needed to conform and perform. No one valued individuality or opinion.

To belong to the church, I needed to memorize Bible verses, creeds, and catechism. No one asked or wondered what was in my heart.

To belong in high school, I needed a pedigree. The fathers of popular students were attorneys, physicians, and University of Maryland professors. My father was a skilled carpenter and firefighter. No one asked me to prom or homecoming.

In nursing school, I needed to compromise my values if I wanted a brisk social life. I chose to study or babysit instead. No one asked me on second dates.

My path to belonging was confusing and heartbreaking. Would I ever be accepted, regardless of ornamentation, rank, or performance? When I questioned God, He wisely used patients on my path to be my guides, and I theirs.

Terminally ill, they endured loss of hair, identities, and personal dignity. In the twilight hours of the morning, I listened to heartfelt confessions:

They regretted trying to conform and perform.
They regretted not expressing their individuality.
They regretted memorizing and reciting without question.
They regretted not sharing their deepest thoughts.
They regretted not including those who were different.
They regretted not loving others as themselves.
They regretted compromising values and priorities.
They regretted not making things right with God.

Had they done enough to enter heaven? I assured my dying patients that by grace we are *all saved*. *Jesus paid the price of admission.* Then releasing early illusions of belonging, they transitioned from my arms to the warm embrace of God, where they belonged.

*Jane Ellen Nielsen*
I have called you by name, you are mine (Isaiah 43:1). Belonging – I spent many days pondering the deeper meanings of this word, and, for me, nothing in particular was coming through. There are lots of ways of belonging: belonging to family, neighborhood, school, church – endless ways. Nothing that really inspired.

I thought of the ways we belong to Westminster, how we feel welcomed, heard, and accepted – our church is a very special place – but belonging means so much more.

Finally, I returned to the writings of Henri Nouwen that I always find helpful. Here’s an excerpt from Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World:

“When we claim and constantly reclaim the truth of being the chosen ones, we soon discover within ourselves a deep desire to reveal to others their own chosenness. Instead of making us feel that we are better, more precious or valuable than others, our awareness of being chosen opens our eyes to the chosenness of others. That is the great joy of being chosen: the discovery that others are chosen as well. In the house of God there are many mansions. There is a place for everyone - a unique, special place. Once we deeply trust that we ourselves are precious in God’s eyes, we are able to recognize the preciousness of others and their unique places in God’s heart.”

The only way we really belong to something greater than ourselves is to acknowledge the belongingness of others; and so, we belong to each other — and to God.

Mary Johnson
And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God will be with them” (Revelation 21:3)
BELONGING

One of my favorite hymns in the new Presbyterian Church (USA) Glory to God hymnal is #822 "When We Are Living" that is inspired by the texts of Romans 14:7-8: “For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.” We belong to God at all times.

This is a core foundation of my faith. Knowing that I belong to God and I am part of his wider creation, I am a piece of his wonder. I have assurance in the teaching that I am created in his image. I am not just a mistake, a tryout or a product of an experiment, but I was well intended and well designed to fit God’s plan from the beginning. I am God’s own. And you belong just as I do. We all belong.

We belong to our families, we belong to our church communities, we belong to our affinity groups, we belong to our neighborhoods and towns, origins, beliefs, but foremost, we are members of God’s family. We belong to God.

One thing I like to meditate on that gives me comfort no matter my struggles is knowing how precious I am to God, that he would do anything to make sure I fit in. He has sacrificed his only beloved Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, so that I may have a seat at the table. God has paid the price of my inheritance. He has adopted me through the blood of Jesus Christ on Calvary. And so I am a child of God. This privilege extends to you and me through the grace of God. We are all heirs and belong within the circle of God’s embrace.

Justin Komlan
As I write this, I am completing the last day of teaching an anti-racism course at Luther Seminary. I have been teaching this course with Dr. Mary Hess for more than a decade. Mary has recently published a very helpful book called *Becoming a White Antiracist: A Practical Guide for Educators, Leaders, and Activists*. I also lead diversity training in corporate settings, and I coach executives. The goal of my work is to create workplaces, churches, schools, private, and public institutions that welcome all people. In order to make belonging a reality in America, we have to dismantle the racist systems, beliefs, and behaviors of our leaders and people.

Dismantling racism through preaching and teaching was my family’s mission. I grew up in a home with parents who worked in segregated Lutheran churches and schools as missionaries. Dad was a Lutheran pastor and teacher. Mom was a teacher. Later in their careers, they both held public office. Dad was a member of the Omaha School Board and Mom was a Housing Commissioner.

I was raised believing that all of us are God’s children and that we are made in God’s image—*Imago Dei*. Genesis 1:26-27, “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...’ “So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

I’m a teacher/professor and writer. That is my calling. I am a learner. My students teach me as much as I teach them. I am always amazed by their faith, courage, scholarship, and care. Our anti-racism course used to be required, but it is now an elective. We have as many students as we ever did, which comforts me—the church is in good hands.

*Vivian Jenkins Nelson*
BELONGING IN ITS MANY FORMS

Finding your people, those you can be yourself with
Who don’t mind when you’re not your best self or you fail
Who accept that you are human with human ups and downs
Who connect in the tough moments and share in struggles
Don’t shy away from the sweat and tears of life
Who show kindness
Laugh with you at life’s ridiculousness

A family with whom you can revisit the same old stories over and over
Who knows the joke that you will tell
Who knew you in all of your different stages
Accepted your questionable choices
Never stops showing up

Finding your purpose, your way of contributing
The blessing of finding joy and energy in God’s work for you

In a pandemic year, the friendly face who says Hello and asks about your kids while pulling garbage cans to the curb on Tuesdays
The other mom you chat with at the bus stop every morning,
Sometimes the only person you see outside of your own family

The joy of opening your circle wider and wider –
if we listen there is always something to connect over
Belonging to this earth, this land, this place:
The woods, the fireflies, the snowflakes, the fields, the clouds
Embracing you and imprinting you more each year

The gift of loving yourself
In good times and bad
“Warts and all” as Grandma used to say

And most of all, the peace and promise of always belonging with God
Who knows you through and through and is always with you

We are never alone

Emily McChesney
“In life and in death we belong to God.” Thus, begins the Brief Statement of Faith that was adopted by our General Assembly in 1991. The fact that it is the first statement shows its importance to our faith. We belong to God and this belonging is different from belonging to a social club, a political party, or even a church. All the latter are things that we can change, but there is nothing we can do to change the former. As Psalm 100 says, “Acknowledge that the Lord is God. He made us, and we belong to Him; we are His people, we are His flock.” How shall we respond to belonging to God? Too often we try to ignore it as an inconvenient truth and go our own way. But the true response is found in Micah: “What the Lord requires is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God”.

David Bowen
We enter this church not as stranger, but as children of God. You may recall that in pre-Covid times these words were found on the front cover of our Sunday bulletin. I miss them. They have always felt welcoming to me, even as a long-time member of Westminster; I hope they’ve provided a sense of welcome to visitors in our midst too.

Further, some of these words are part of Westminster’s baptism liturgy. At the conclusion of this sacrament, we hear; “See what love God has for us, that we should be called the children of God. And so we are!” These words remind us, no matter our age, we all are children of God and we all belong.

The promises we make at baptism serve as the foundation for the Families, Youth, and Children’s Ministries. In particular, these words are essential to providing a sense of belonging to our children: “...we promise to love, encourage, and support you.”

It is my hope that in those promises we make at baptism that the children of Westminster always find “a joyful welcome” like the one described in this blessing from Meta Herrick Carlson’s speak it plain – words for worship and life together.

Children
May you find a joyful welcome
at the heart of this assembly,
so these adults never forget
they were once children themselves.

May your eyes and ears gather good stories about what really matters to God,
so that love has the loudest word
whenever the world tries to say otherwise.

May your whole sense of self know safety here, honored and loved beyond measure
according to the promises we spoke over you in baptism and ever since.

Marie Kruskop

May your life know value and purpose,
for you have been called and set free
to be hope and justice for those who do not know they are already and always enough.

May you go boldly into the world,
but find your way home whenever you need these sights and sounds
that know who and whose you are.
With a far too adventurous birth experience, I found myself grateful and in awe of my son’s healthy arrival. And then my concerns about my swelling legs were dismissed repeatedly, “It’s normal after the delivery that you had.” In less than 48 hours after having my son, I had been discharged from the hospital and given a nurse line number to call if I had questions before my in-home visit.

At home, my legs continued to swell. I couldn’t sleep, despite being exhausted. I continued to call the postpartum nurse line only to be repeatedly told that it was normal.

Finally, I called my ob/gyn department and was instructed to go immediately to the ER for attention to my legs that were now swollen up to my thighs. I was readmitted around midnight because all the liquid that my body had retained was starting to affect my liver and blood pressure. In that sterile and stifling room, my connection with God felt so far away. This disorientation led me to reach out to one of our Westminster pastors; I needed reassurance that God’s love was close, even if I wasn’t able to feel it.

Meghan arrived and asked if she could lead a prayer. “Yes, please.”

She cupped Owen in her hands, and prayed over all of us. It was the most tender and vulnerable moment of my faith. What was broken and empty was filled with raw emotion and love.

Months later when I attended my first Mom’s Group meeting at Westminster, sharing my story and the postpartum anxiety that followed, I felt heard and seen.

I belong to a community who speaks truth about our struggles, faith, and finding ourselves in our new roles. Leaning into our humanity connects us more to those around us and to God’s vision for a beloved community.

Sonja Dziekeiowski
Throughout my time in college and seminary, I remember feeling the occasional sense of frustration to be learning about a historical event or figure for the very first time. How had no one shared this with me before? I felt this most acutely during my late teen years, as I unpacked my years of public schooling in South Carolina, learning more and more about what my teachers failed to include in their lessons, and what our state textbooks conveniently excluded. It happened all over again in seminary.

During a course on theologies of disability and human difference, a professor shared photographs from the “Capitol Crawl”, a 1990 protest at the U.S. Capitol that I’d never heard of. On March 13, 1990, in the thick of the struggle to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), over a thousand people gathered at the Capitol to protest inaccessible architecture and structures. Many of the protestors were wheelchair or walker users, and about 60 of them cast aside their mobility aids, choosing instead to crawl up the Capitol stairs with whatever means they had, relying on one another’s bodies to keep moving together. This remarkable demonstration of solidarity and protest helped to garner media attention that encouraged the passage of the ADA later that year. How had I never heard of the “Capitol Crawl”? Now, I share this protest with Westminster’s young people whenever I get a chance.

When I think about belonging, I think about the Capitol Crawl. I count those protestors among our spiritual ancestors – those who struggled together to create belonging for people with all kinds of bodies and minds. Their actions helped to mend inaccessible systems, breaking down barriers to access and building solidarity among community members. This is the work to which we are called as followers of Jesus. This is the work of belonging.

The Rev. Alexandra Jacob
Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honor.
Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Indeed, those who are far from you will perish; you put an end to those who are false to you.
But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all your works.

(Psalm 73:23-28)
Lenten Day 29 | Monday, April 4

At the beginning of his ministry, as Jesus was bringing on his disciples, the scripture that is most foundational of this action was Matthew 19:29: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.”

As one who left my siblings, parents, and childhood home very early in my adult life; who never returned; who physically moved many times; who had many different careers and many friends from divergent backgrounds; I always struggled with a sense of where I belonged. Admittedly I didn’t leave home to follow Jesus, but to follow my own dreams (which ultimately turned out to be about Jesus!). I’ve always wondered where was the place that I could rest my head, or more specifically, my spirit, and feel like it was the place for me. The wish for belonging is set in the deepest part of our souls where we yearn to be connected to each other and ultimately to God. I believe that is where the reference to receiving hundredfold in this scripture leads us as we accept the place that Jesus has set before us in our lives. It is not a physical place, but a space for the heart. One of my inspirational poets, David Whyte, wrote a series on belonging. This is an excerpt of his musings:

“This is the bright home
in which I live,
this is where
I ask
my friends
to come,
this is where I want
to love all the things
it has taken me so long
to learn to love...
There is no house
like the house of belonging.”

Within that “house of belonging” is where I believe God is and it allows us to become interconnected with each other. This is a belonging that cannot be defined by what you don’t have, but by what already is within you.

The Rev. Denise L. Dunbar-Perkins
BELONGING, WITH AUTISM

Autism is part of my belonging within a community with love and support. It has changed the way Westminster loves and supports belonging within this vibrant community.

The practice of prayer has given me a new understanding of what Belonging means – knowing I live with the love and support of the Westminster community.

In the silence we are taught to pray that God will belong to us all. In the silence we understand that we all belong to God and that God belongs to all of us. We all belong to Christ throughout our lives. He’s with us all from baptism to life eternal. Autism is community within a community that loves and supports people with their intellectual differences.

Share the love of God, the knowledge that we belong.

In life and death, and life beyond death we are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.

David Hastings
BELONGING

Belonging implies feeling positively connected to someone or to a group. Over my lifetime I’ve identified with many groups/institutions believing I belonged. We shared common values and sought similar goals, yet in these days of Covid and increasing political unrest, my sense of belonging is questionable. What does it mean to be American? A person of faith? A member of the human family? How can we honestly believe in belonging if so many are excluded? How do we belong if we are incapable of tolerating those with problematic or seemingly illogical viewpoints? These are questions I struggle with and wonder what needs to happen to minimize the extreme polarization that threatens long-held principles of sustaining the social contract and supporting the common good.

I often reflect on the six “Rs,” shared with the Westminster community in a presentation by the co-moderators of the Presbyterian Church(USA). Elona Street-Stewart called out a necessary process for racial justice and healing which included: Remembrance, Remorse, Repentance, Repair, Reconciliation, and Resurrection – all within a spirit of reciprocity. I know many are working tirelessly to reweave our social fabric to create the beloved community, yet my sense of hope is fragile. I naively believed we were at a point of reconciliation when Black Lives Matter rose to the forefront. I realize so much more needs to happen before we move into reconciliation, let alone resurrection.

Will we ever achieve the beloved community, the ultimate in belonging? The Creator loves each of us unconditionally and in its infinite wisdom, believes we are capable of achieving this goal. Though my sense of hope and belonging is fragile, I can’t bring myself to give up. We all belong to God’s family.

Susan Sheridan Tucker
BELONGING

Sitting in the quiet stillness, we belonged, to this world, to this family, to each other. And though she was gone, she still belonged to this family, to each of us. But now she also belonged to something bigger, something more sacred and divine. In this life we can identify how we belong concretely, as a child, a parent, a friend - with a vague notion of being a child of God. But when we leave this realm, I imagine vague notions become knowledge. We still will belong in the hearts of those here who loved us, but we then will understand how completely we belong to and with God. And perhaps that is a goal in life, to belong to and with those we love. This is in order to learn how to open our hearts to something bigger than ourselves, preparing us for another type of belonging, a divine and all-encompassing belonging as a true child of God - that which we have always been, yet not fully understood. But she understands; she is with God.

Carol Peitzman
Belonging is in the small, but significant ways we treat one another. My earliest memory of belonging came when I was four years old. I had pneumonia that required a hospital stay. The nurses were kind but my parents were only allowed to visit once a day. I had a stuffed yellow duck they gave me for comfort inside the plastic oxygen tent. My sense of where I belonged was not in the hospital. It was a lonely place. When I was recovered from the pneumonia, but still sensing I had missed much at home, I went to Sunday School and all the children were singing *Jesus Loves Me*. I burst into tears because they had learned the song while I was away. All these decades later I still remember the teacher (though not her name) who said it was alright because I could learn the song with the class. She picked me up and put me in her lap in the rocking chair she used and held me close. I still remember that comforting hug. The class sang *Jesus Loves Me* until I could sing along. That is belonging.

*Gretchen Wrobel*

Belonging to the community of believers has always been important to me. I remember as an 11-year-old kid my parents being handed a letter from some members of the church accusing them of not bringing enough food to potlucks. All of the sudden I worried that I didn’t belong to the community—that I wasn’t welcome. It was the worst feeling.

But I knew that I belonged regardless of what my parents had done. I felt that I mattered to God no matter what. I knew that only my actions mattered to God. No one could separate the love and grace of God from me. I belonged to that and in that community. My community of believers kept challenging me and embracing me no matter what my family did or did not do. God’s love is like that—continuous, accepting, and always there whether you want it or not!

I chose to feel the love and I chose to continue to belong. Or was God really choosing me—choosing me to belong to the church community and belong to God’s community? I am chosen. I belong.

*Laura Lee Moffett*
WHO ARE YOUR PEOPLE?

I was visiting with a friend from North Carolina several years ago in the Atlanta home of a couple hosting us for a few days. A friend of the hosts came by and introduced herself. My friend asked, “Who are your people?” Within 90 seconds they established a common connection; they learned they belonged to one another.

I had seen this happen before with friends from the south. To tell the truth, as a northerner, I was envious. We tend to hold our stories more tightly, which may be why belonging sometimes seems more difficult.

Who are our people? That is the question when it comes to what it means to belong.

Our culture makes a fetish of defining the opposite – who does not belong to us, or to our group. Politics in our land has devolved to determining if the group to which we belong benefits from a particular policy or position, regardless of the merits of the matter.

As Christians we resist the currents flowing among us in America today. Jesus overthrew the assumptions of his time; we need to do the same in ours. Our faith invites a counter-cultural posture toward life as we practice it today.

When Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” by a lawyer wanting affirmation of his narrow worldview, he answers as if the question had been, “Who are my people?” Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan to show that in the way he sees the world, the one you might least expect to be “your people,” does, in fact, belong to you, and you to them.

This Lent I want to keep the question before me, every day: who are my people?

The Rev. Dr. Tim Hart-Andersen
Palm Sunday, April 10

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to God through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to God, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.
(2 Corinthians 5:17-19)
Lenten Day 35 | Monday April 11

PRAYER FOR A SOUL IN A DARK PLACE

We lift up to You your child. They belong to You, so these things we ask:

Wrap them in your loving embrace. Hold them as tightly as only You can.
Bring peace to their soul.
Give them strength on their journey.
Show them the other side of pain and darkness.
Give them sunrises and snowflakes and orange leaves and misty fog and joy
and communion.
Open their heart so that they can invite others in.
Dissolve their anger and bitterness with your Grace.
As they walk your Path, reel them in to You.
Push back their darkness so that they can experience your Light.
Illumine them.
Let not the Evil One get one claw into their soul.

We thank You for this child of yours. The gifts of yours that they have are like shining
stars in a cold dark nighttime place; humor, tender heart, music from their fingertips,
patience, beauty, intelligence, steadfastness, and endurance.

In these words and prayers to You, oh God, we lay our hearts and hands on your child.

Penny Bratko
HENRI NOUWEN ON COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

Two quotations from Henri Nouwen show up on my computer each year, the first on Ash Wednesday and the second on Pentecost.

In *A Spirituality of Living* Henri Nouwen writes, “A biblical text that has been very, very important to me is the story in Luke 6:12-19 where Jesus spent the night in prayer on the top of the mountain. In the morning, he came down and created a community of apostles around him. Then in the afternoon, with his apostles, he ministered—he went out and healed and proclaimed the good news.”

Nouwen adds that he was drawn to the Luke text so strongly because in it Jesus sets forth, by his example, three things that we as Christians are to do: “One, communion with God, prayer, or being in solitude with God; secondly, creating community; and thirdly, doing ministry.”

And Nouwen’s words also show up each year on Pentecost, when in tongues of fire the Holy Spirit descended upon the Early Church, giving it form and purpose: “Communities are formed by people with common interests, and by people who want greater levels of intimacy, but Christian communities are formed by people whose hearts are set afire by the same Divine Flame.”

My hope in this season of Lent, and going forward, is that I will seek to practice, deeply, the vision that Jesus started - daily coming to God in prayer; going out to do ministry as I am able and as I am called; and, despite all the pandemic challenges, that I will be a true part of and continue to be nurtured by our Beloved Community here at Westminster and by the larger ecumenical community to which we all belong. With God’s help, let it be so.

Alan Youel
Lenten Day 37 | Wednesday, April 13

We are not our own... Conversely, we are God’s: let us therefore live for [God] and die for [God.]  (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.7.1, John Calvin, 1559)

Q. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.  (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Zacharias Ursinus, 1563)

In life and in death we belong to God.  (*A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1991)

These statements from our Reformed Tradition form the bedrock of my understanding of belonging.

First, last, and always, I am a child of God. God has created me, shaped me, and called me to be God’s own. I may have hopes and desires for my own life, but the tumblers in the lock fail to fall into place unless those hopes and desires are shaped by my identity as God’s person.

Psychologists say that belonging is one of our most important needs. A sense of belonging contributes to our resilience in difficult times. When we know that we are not alone we can cope with stresses more effectively. *The Statement of Faith* from the United Church of Canada, also part of the Reformed Tradition states: *In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone.*

If we each belong to God, then it follows that all of us belong to God. Our belonging in community is rooted in God’s beloved claim on our lives. Whether our belonging is lived out in intimate relationships or in the vast connection of the human race, our Reformed world view insists that we are not alone. We belong to God, and we belong to each other. Thanks be to God!

*The Rev. Kathy Michael*
WE ARE CHOSEN TO BELONG

Trevor Noah, in his book *Born a Crime: Stories from A South African Childhood*, recalls seeing and finally being with his estranged father. Noah says: “Seeing him had reaffirmed his choosing of me. He chose to have me in his life. He chose to answer my letter. I was wanted. Being chosen is the greatest gift you can give to another human being.” His remembrance gives me fresh insight about Beloved Community.

In Baptism, we are “sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever”. In and for Christ, we have been chosen. Consider John 15:16-17: “You did not choose me but I chose you... so that you may love one another.”

Knowing why we have been chosen compels us to show forth God’s peace and grace with open, grateful hearts, for self and everyone, without bias or judgment. To, in fact, intentionally choose to be loved and choose loving others. Yes, to Belong with and for each other! Believing I am chosen by God strenghtens me to do my part to further God’s work revealed through the incarnate Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit. I believe this is true living out of faith, fueled by hope for bringing about an ever kinder and just world.

I take comfort that Beloved Community is achievable by choice and not to be denied by factors outside of human control. Choice is doable. Choice is freeing. We need only envision what a kind, just, loving world looks like and confidently act together with companion prophets step by step to proceed in that direction. Belonging to Christ is the first step that fills our hearts with love, courage, and compassion to do the life-sustaining work toward shared vision of God’s kingdom on earth.

Noah’s reaction to being chosen by his father was immeasurable joy. He finally belonged. God’s choosing of me...of us all...is the purest grace imaginable. Let us choose to live together sharing in this grace and the hope of Belonging to the Beloved Community!

*Ken Huskins*
BELONGING IN LOVE AND SPIRIT

Lord God, I praise you in how you have always been a loving presence throughout my life. Meditate now on how God has glowed warmly in your life.

I seek your love, Lord God, more deeply today. I am sorry my sin acts to obscure your love light in my life. Please enter my soul and forgive me, may your shining countenance seek out every corner of darkness, wash out all stain and stench of sin, repair any cracks and burnish my soul inside and out so I might reflect your love in my life and bring glory to you. I belong to you.

My only legitimate response to all of your love is to give myself wholly to you as your servant.

Teach me my proper place relative to you, working to build humility, knowing I am but a breath.

Teach me how your Spirit might overshadow me so you, Lord God, might use me to fulfill your will.

Teach me, Lord God, how to listen to your Spirit and respond. I belong to your people.

Lord God, as you brighten and enliven your Spirit in my soul, I seek your Spirit glowing in creation and in others I meet at church and in your world. I belong as part of your creation. I belong in your church. I belong in your world without human divisions of race, money and level of accomplishment.

I am excited to attach myself to you as I seek your face of love and acceptance more deeply, every day longing to see your full face in the future!

I look forward to living and working in your heavenly courts with my friends and family now and forever. I belong in heaven, connected in Spirit, worshiping, singing and praising you.

*Anonymous*
When I consider this topic — belonging — I feel immeasurable gratitude for the strong sense of belonging I feel today. For instance, I feel I belong as a husband and father in a loving family, as a brother among siblings, and as a son to my parents living nearby in my childhood home. I belong as a neighbor in our Minneapolis community of 20 years. I belong on the hockey rink skating with “beer league” teammates and on wilderness waters paddling with friends. I belong as a lawyer in professional circles and as a musician among bandmates. I belong in my church community, and in a much broader sense I belong to God. I am fortunate, indeed privileged beyond measure, not only to have a family, a home, and communities in which to live with purpose, but to feel deeply at home, where I belong, in these places.

My gratitude for this present reality is informed by another truth, a darker one, dictated by severe depression that has altogether consumed me on three occasions in my life, most recently about six years ago. At these times, this darker truth told me I do not belong, not in my family, not among friends, not in any place. In fact, this truth convinced me to my core I was completely and utterly worthless, stripping me of any sense of connection with others. I had no use for God, because why would anyone, least of all God, care about me? In the deep end of the depression pool lurks the ultimate irreconciliation.

Mercifully, by the grace of God, and with the love and care of so many in our Westminster community, treatment lifted me from those hollow depths to again know the blessings of belonging and experience the fullness of life. Thanks be to God!

Jeffrey Gram
The Last Supper, by Sadao Watanabe, Katazome stencil print, 1979, Japan
Among the stars there are different kinds of beauty (1 Corinthians 15:41) created by Westminster members and facilitated by artist-in-residence Katherine Parent, acrylic ink and oil pastel on gessoboard, 2021. All art within this Lenten booklet is from The Westminster Collection.