

# PILGRIM

## CHURCH

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

### A MATTER OF BELONGING

John 18:33-37 November 22, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

Belonging. It is at the heart of our text for today in the Gospel of John. It is a great text as we celebrate Christ the King Sunday.

Did you ever decide as a child to run away from home? It never occurred to me, but it seems to be fairly common. A kid is frustrated and often in a dramatic pronouncement decided to leave home. The child packs some food and other important items for what will be no doubt a long, tough journey. For many years, the specialist in the field of child care recommended that parents and other care givers talk with the child about where they would go, how they would live. Soon the child would realize that running away from home was not a very good option. I guess that advice is reasonable, but lately it has been replaced by another response. Now it is recommended that parents simple tell the child, "No, you cannot leave home. You belong here." Parents explain that they may not run away because "we belong to one another." And we still belong to one another when we are frustrated and upset. But when persons belong to one another, they stay with one another.

That question of belonging is at the heart of this conversation between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate is trying to determine if Jesus claims to be King of the Jewish nation. Jesus answers by asking questions of Pilate – "Do you ask this on your own or did others tell you about me?" Jesus then explains that the nation, the Kingdom to which he belongs is not a political nation, but in reality it is a theological one. Jesus and his followers belong to a Kingdom that is not earthly bound – they belong to the truth. Pilate understands "King" and "Kingship" in earthly terms. Does Jesus claim to be King in the face of Roman might? Earlier in this story, Pilate has asked Jesus, "Don't you know I have the power to crucify you or to release you?" Jesus explains that proclaiming the truth, being the truth, even belonging to the truth is what makes him a king. Don't be misled, this Kingdom to which Jesus belongs is not an imaginary concept – Jesus is referring to the Kingdom of God. Yes, Jesus is aware of the power of Pilate. Yes, Jesus is aware of the might of the Roman Empire. But the Kingdom of God is not a political one that his followers would fight for in the sense that Rome understands. Jesus comes from and belongs to God's kingdom. That is the sense of Christ the King and his kingdom.

It is a matter of belonging. Children are not the only one's to test this idea of belonging to a family. We, as adults, also test our belonging to our families. We also test our belonging to our communities of faith. Some people just leave quietly by drifting away. Others decide they can no longer believe or follow the way of the church. Look at all the members who pulled out of our major denominations at started new churches because they did not want to be

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inclusive. They did not want black people in their church. Some of them found other places to worship, some of them just dropped out of this Kingdom of God. Same thing is happening now in the area of sexual orientation. Is the Kingdom of God inclusive, does God really love us all, or does God just love the people like me? Go no further than Pilgrim to understand that some people no longer want to belong to a church that believes the Kingdom of God is all inclusive. I know people who have left the community of faith they belonged to because worship included reading the Revised Standard Version of the bible rather than the King James Version. Our belonging is tested.

Even our citizenship is tested. People demonstrate for peace – they oppose any military effort. Some will not serve in the military because of their faith. We struggle with the idea that everyone is entitled to a good education, yet our public schools are not equal in the education they provide. Health care. It is testing our citizenship. Are we going to include everyone or not?

One problem we have in our American culture is this profound emphasis on the individual. These tests of belonging – to family, community of faith, nation are focused on the individual's own decision making. But

the words of Jesus, when he says that those who belong to the truth listen to his voice, collide with our individualism. Bruce Malina writes that one of the greatest challenges for Americans in reading the Bible is to understand our emphasis on individualism and the Mediterranean emphasis on the community. Malina explains that the world of the New Testament did not think that the individual acted alone, regardless of what others think and say. Rather, in that culture, the person is always aware of the expectations of others and strives to meet those expectations. You know who you are because of the community.

The Peace Corps asked us to take a picture album with us to introduce ourselves to our home stay family. We were asked to include pictures of family, friends, our house, our car, our church, our school – things like that which would help introduce us. I sat down with my home stay family and they got out their album and we spent a couple of hours talking, laughing, trying to learn about each other.. Even at the end of all that work on family and what was important, my home stay family had questions, puzzled looks on their faces. “How can you come over here for two years?” “How can you be away from your family, your friends for two years?” From my way of thinking, I easily, (at least I thought easily) explained that I would write, I could talk on the phone, we could send packages. They just didn't seem to get it. About six weeks later, a Peace Corps volunteer who had been there for a couple of years came to talk to us at a training session. “How are you doing with your greeting?” We smiled and were

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proud to answer that we had the greeting down – we knew how to greet – and did it all the time. He then asked, “Why is that important?” We answered, “Well, to be polite, to fit into the culture.” He explained to us that there was a deeper, more basic reason. He then taught us a Zulu saying, “Umuntu, Umuntu, nga Bantu.” “A person is a person because of the people.” A person is created by the community. Ask us “Who are you?” and we will probably respond by talking about where we live, the school we attended, the kind of car we drive., the work we do. But that “nga” is “by means of” - by means of the people. In other words, a person is a person because of the community. That is why my home stay family had puzzled looks after our introduction. That is why every night I came home after dark they were out in the street looking for me. The smile on Melusi’s face, the three and a half year old in our

family told me that I belonged. How can you exist, how can you be a person out of the context of what it is that defines you? Greeting. The whole community looked after you. It is through your relationships in the community that you are a person. Belonging!

Christ the King Sunday. Here we are in our new space. May it always serve to remind us that we belong together in this community of faith we call Pilgrim. May it remind us that we belong to the Kingdom of God.