

Remember You Belong

Trinity CRC, September 15, 2109 AM
Remembering Your Baptism II

1 Corinthians 12:12-17

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Dear Body of Christ,

It's crazy how our society has never been more connected through electronics than it is today. People can't leave the room without their phone. Many are addicted to social media—Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram. I can't keep up with all the apps people are using. And, of course, texting is huge. Almost everyone from high school and up has a cell phone that hardly ever leaves their side.

Someone remarked to me a week or so ago that we used to sit a doctor's waiting room and chat with other patients. Now we all have our noses pointed at our phone and our eyes glued to a screen. We are never more than a few thumb-taps away from someone else. You'd think that no one feels alone today. Everyone belongs.

But we are increasingly discovering that all of this electronic connection is no substitute for the real thing. The social media has made us lonelier in some sense. Despite being super-connected through our media, more and more people are lonely, depressed and even suicidal. Don't get me wrong. I love the technology too. But it can't replace personal relationship. In some ways, it has made us put up walls that we didn't have before. It has made us into a bunch of liars who are always projecting a fake image of ourselves. We are following people who are projecting fake images of themselves, a world where everything is better than perfect. No zits. No wrinkles. No warts. Even when we're sick, we're posting "thumbs up" emojis because we want people to think we're handling everything fabulously. But we don't show the reality of barfing in the toilet! At least I haven't seen those yet 😊. We try to keep up appearances. My life is better than most!

Friends, the church is here for such a time as this. We all know we aren't perfect by any means. We confess it together! More importantly, however, we confess that Jesus accepts us with our flaws and makes us children of God. In a world where we are trying to portray our perfect lives so that we can fit in with everyone else, Jesus says to us, "In me, you belong to God. And in me you belong to one another. You're family. You're loved. And you'll get what you need."

Baptism: A Mark of Belonging

For the month of September, we're focusing in our morning worship on remembering our baptism. And why? Because—among other things—baptism is a sign of belonging. Last week we heard how it is sign of our identity. Today we want to see that it marks us as a people who belong to Christ. And, in Christ, we belong to one another. We are never alone.

—to God in Christ

Remember that when you were baptized, God said, “Now you belong to me because of my Son Jesus Christ!” Almost 9 years ago, I baptized Ashton VanBoom. Do you remember that, Ashton? Of course not. You were just a little guy. Chris and Teresa went through a long adoption process and once the papers were signed, Ashton was baptized. But he was still young and can’t remember it.

As most of you know, my wife spent a year taking care of our daughter and her family up until last March. After Rachel suffered a brain bleed, her 21-month-old daughter Camille became grandma’s number one responsibility. As you can imagine, it was a delightful time for Patsy in the midst of a very difficult time dealing with Rachel’s uncertain health. Patsy has such fond memories of the year she spent with Camille. But now, only 6 months later, 3½ year old Camille doesn’t remember a thing of her time with grandma.

But that doesn’t change the fact that it happened. It doesn’t change the fact that grandma cherishes that memory and has a special place in her heart for Camille. Likewise with baptism. Whether we remember it, it doesn’t change what happened. It doesn’t change the love that is represented. Rachel is our daughter. Tory is our son in law. Camille is our granddaughter. We love them. They belong to our family. In a much greater way than this, baptism marks us as members of God’s family. He gives us his loving promise that he’ll always be here for us. He’s saying, “I promise to be your God!” And if human parents will drop everything the second our family needs us, how much more will God—our perfect heavenly Father—do whatever is needed for every one of his dear children. We might not always understand his ways but everything he does is done in love for his children. It’s his promise to us in baptism.

Baptism is God’s sign to us, his children. Some make it simply our sign of our faith in God. But it’s much more than that. Whether we administer it to infants, teenagers or adults, it is, first of all, God saying to us, “You belong to me! I’m marking you as mine! Welcome to my family.” Yes, I want you to respond positively to my love for you. But I will love you regardless and always be interested in seeing you prosper and become all that I intend for you to be.

When I was a kid on the dairy farm, we only had 30 cows so every cow had a name. When farms started getting bigger, every cow got a number that was tied around her neck so the farmer could know which one of his cows he was dealing with in order to take good care of her. As technology developed and farms got still bigger, every cow now receives a transponder around her neck. And that transponder gets messages from a computer and sends messages back to it. It lets the cow get a certain amount of feed that will help her maintain the best health and produce the most milk. And the moment her health is in question due to a rise in body temperature or something like that, the transponder will send a message to the farmer’s phone so he or she can take action. That’s what it looks like when a dairy cow belongs to a farmer who wants her to thrive. She is given a name, a

number or a transponder that says she belongs to the farmer. And that farmer is going to care for Bessy in order to help her reach her full bovine potential.

We are not cows or bulls. Far from it! We are human beings, God's crowning creation. He calls us partners with him in caring for the world he created. We are stewards of this grand world. So a good farmer marks his cows to say "they belong to me" and then cares for them. How much more will our Father in heaven care for us, his children whom he marks with his sign of the covenant. We are precious to him because we bear his image—we're made to be and act like him.

Someone could argue that we don't need the mark in order to belong. That's true. God knows who we are. He's not marking us—like a farmer marks his cows—in order to remember who belongs to him. No, the mark of baptism is for our benefit. And every time we see another person being baptized, we must remember that we belong to God through Christ as well. He knows! We must remember whose we are!

Baptism is an outward sign of something that was real before you even realized it. That's why infant baptism is so fitting. It reminds us that we belong before we realize it. We belong before we believe all the right stuff. We belong before we behave all the right ways. Baptism itself is God's sign to us first and foremost. I'll be your God, he says. You belong! You belong to me!! And because of this amazing grace to us, we believe and behave. Not the other way around. We don't belong because we behave or believe first. It's God's gift to us, first of all, that marks us as belonging to him.

—to the Body of Christ

Not only does our baptism signify the reality that we belong to the Lord, though. It also reminds us that we belong to the Lord's body. The head of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ puts his mark on us and says, "Now you belong to the body of Christ, the Church."

Friends, you are never alone as a Christian because Jesus is always with you. You can pray to him at any moment and anywhere. But he's also given you a covenant community called the Church or the Body of Christ.

Of course, you aren't likely going to call the whole church to listen to you when you've had a bad day at work or school or when you want to pull your hair out because the kids at home are driving you around the bend. Or when you're frustrated in your marriage, you don't write up a bulletin announcement for everyone to read.

Nonetheless, there are people within the church that you can reach out to. The first ones might be your trusted friends. You could talk to your elder. You could come see one of us pastors. I'm personally excited for the marriage mentoring course you heard about. I think that's a great model for enhancing our ministry to one another as members of the body of Christ. Having someone with more

experience to coach you along when you hit a wall is a great gift that the church offers her people. It's one of the side benefits of baptism. We belong to one another. Where you lack abilities, someone else has an ability or gift or experience that will help you along.

My brother had an issue with his pinky on one hand. It was a persistent problem and no matter what the doctor did, his pinky just kept curling up. After several attempted fixes, my brother said to the doctor, "Just cut it off." It was extreme but he was sick of fighting a losing battle with his pinky. And, really, the pinky seems pretty insignificant. But I asked my brother a few months ago, "Do you notice that your pinky is missing?" His answer shouldn't surprise us because every single part of our body plays a role, even if it's a small role. Sometimes the smallest things are very significant. Anyway, my brother told me, "I drop a lot of nails when I'm doing a construction project." That little pinky was the thing that kept the handful of nails in his hand.

And that's Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 12. That's the point of our memory verse this week too: "In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (Rom 12:5) The hand needs all five fingers ideally. Even the pinky does something the other fingers can't do without it. We need each other and we benefit from being together. We belong to one another, to help and hold and love. Suffice it to say that you and I are blessed to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and, in that way, to be baptized into the church, the body of Christ. For our Lord who loves us dearly offers us blessings through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and even through the children whom we might sometimes consider the pinkies of the church. This is our Lord's good design for us to help us when we are lonely, depressed, troubled or anything else.

Belonging Carries Responsibility

I'm so proud of young Ashton. He came up to me after worship a couple of months ago and said, "Pastor Rich, I want to participate in the Lord's Supper. I want to make profession of faith!" He's young but he knows whose he is. He knows he's adopted and loved by Chris and Teresa and all of us. But most importantly, like all of us, he's adopted by God. Sin has alienated us all from our true position with God and in this world. But Christ brings us back into the Father's embrace. And the Father marks us with the sign of his covenant love. The Lord Jesus puts us into a body of believers, a family. And with that we receive the Holy Spirit who gives us the strength—even the faith—to live up to our calling as those who belong to God.

You see, belonging comes with responsibility. We are marked as people who are set apart by God for his purposes in this world. We aren't baptized and promised God's eternal love and grace so we can sit on it. We aren't given the body of believers so that we can simply take and take while we ignore needs around us. We remember that God's love for us is not dependent on our behaviour or activity. But when we truly remember our baptism by recalling what God has done for us in Christ, how can we not be moved to a loving response to God's

grace? Think of how the psalmist in Psalm 84 longs to be in the house of God. He remembers all that God has done for him and how wonderful it is to be part of the family of God. He remembers walking among his fellow believers to the temple with joyful hearts because they were going to celebrate—to remember—God's goodness to them in the past and the present. When we likewise remember how God has made us his children and given us his family, then something must click in our hearts that moves us from receiving to giving. Not because we must but because we want to. It moves us to praise with our lips but also to praise God with our lives by serving others.

David Snapper writes, "I over-winter geraniums because I'm too cheap to buy new ones each spring. For geraniums, the life is in the stems, not the root and not the leaves. In contrast, an apple tree is sustained by deep, underground roots. My orchid's life is in its leaves.

"The church – the local congregation – finds life in its members. Not in its pastor. Not in denominational boards, great theologians or history. A church's spiritual life resides in its members...." And the members, of course, receive our life from our connection to Christ. Snapper's point is that healthy churches are those where the members are actively engaged in ministry. People are caring for people. We aren't just friendly and welcoming new people who come through the doors. No, we embrace one another and we serve one another. When one part hurts, we all hurt. When one part rejoices we all rejoice. We are united in Christ and united to one another.

You only have to twist the letters of united a little bit to make the word "untied". When we stop being united in our love for Christ and one another, the life drains out of the church and it starts dying. It becomes untied, in that sense.

The beautiful part of all of Paul's descriptions of the church as the body of Christ is that every part is blessed when it serves as the Lord intended. The happiest people in the church are often the ones who are most involved. I'm not advocating being overly involved. Just doing your part. Too often those who like what they do keep doing more and more because they love the Lord and love the church. They feel compelled to help out when others won't step up and do their share.

Please hear me. Everyone has gifts and abilities that God has given you. And when you use those gifts to bless the church—your sisters and brothers all around you—you will never regret it. You'll be blessed in return. But when you start feeling weary in your service, it's probably a sign that you're doing something that's not your gifting. Or you're simply doing too much. You don't have to feel guilty for stepping back sometimes and taking a break. Rest is also an essential part of a body's life. Take what you need so you can give your best and give cheerfully as you bless the greater body of our Lord.

One of the things I love about this church is how I see people putting others ahead of themselves. That's a mark of the Spirit's work in your lives. It's a mark of

selflessness. We don't have to agree on every single thing. That's unlikely since we are all different. We are body with diversity. But we have to remember that Christ came for us all. He gave his life for everyone and loves everyone. So we must love one another. And when we truly do so, the church remains vibrant, strong and united. The Apostle Paul in a paraphrase of Galatians 5:15 writes, "Be careful when you bite and devour one another – there will be nothing left but bones!" And when the church is down to "the bones" then it's pretty much dead.

What Paul's call to pursue unity and health in the body reminds us that we must always be aware of things that cause breakdowns in our relationship with Christ and with one another. That's why forgiveness and reconciliation are important to the well-being of the church. That's what we celebrate each time we receive the Lord's Supper. Likewise, we remember that baptism is a mark of our being washed clean of our sin. It's a reminder that Jesus has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. It's a sign of God's love for us that drove him to great lengths to reconcile us to himself and to one another—so we would know we belong.

Friends, we are the body of Christ, all different but united in Christ. We are marked in baptism to remember we belong to God and to remind ourselves that we are his beloved children. So we are called in a world of loneliness and division to build the kind of community where people know they are loved and belong in Christ.