

You Belong: 1. Belonging
John 13:34-35
August 4, 2019
Pastor Steve Richards

Suzy Becker has written *The All Better Book* in which she asked second graders to solve some of the big problems that we face in this world. The children came up with some interesting solutions.

- *Telling people that smoking is bad for them doesn't always work. What would you do to help them quit? Alexis, age 8: Go to a smoker's house and pretend to smoke and die.*
- *Too many people spend too many of their waking hours at a job they don't love or even like. Give their bosses some suggestions. Andrew, age 9: Pay them double and have a big tickling machine for unhappy workers.*
- *With billions of people in the world, someone should be able to figure out a system where no one is lonely. What do you suggest? Kalani, age 8: People should find lonely people and ask them their name and address. Then ask people who aren't lonely their name and address. When you have an even amount of each, assign lonely and not lonely people together in the newspaper. Max, age 9: Make food that talks to you when you eat. For instance, it would say, "How are you doing?" and "What happened to you today?" And Shawna, age 9: We could all visit one lonely person each week.*

Someone should figure out a system where no one is lonely. What do you suggest? Maybe you saw this in the news. Last year, the United Kingdom's Prime Minister, Theresa May, appointed a minister of loneliness to address the social and health issues caused by social isolation. This came about after a 12 month study that found half of the population reported feelings of loneliness at least once a day and more than a third of older adults reported being overwhelmed by loneliness. In fact, loneliness has been proven to be worse for your health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day. And the former Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. Vivek Murthy, wrote in the Harvard Business Review: *During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness.* More than 40% of Americans report suffering from loneliness. With billions of people in the world, someone should be able to figure out a system where no one is lonely.

And someone did. And his name is Jesus: **"I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other."** (John 13:34-35) The system where no one is lonely is called the Church. Too often the church is seen as a building or an institution or Sunday worship or a list of "dos and don'ts," but the church is so much more than that. It is a spiritual family. A few weeks ago, we looked at a story from Mark's gospel where early in his ministry, Jesus was reaching out to the people that were considered unclean and unapproachable and his mother and brothers show up to take him home. He's become an embarrassment to them. So when he's told that his family has arrived, he says **"Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Looking around at those seated around him in a circle, he said, "Look, here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God's will is my brother, sister, and mother."** (Mark 3:32-35) Who is family? Whoever does God's will. And what's that? The commandment – Love each other! Jesus was sent into this world to start a family, and he began by inviting people that went unnoticed or were pushed aside.

Jesus began by inviting Simon and Andrew to follow him. **"Come, follow me," he said... Immediately, they left their nets and followed him. Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John... Jesus called them and**

immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (Matthew 4:19-22)

Immediately, because I think his invitation touch them so deeply that they suddenly realized, I can't miss this. And if you suddenly found the answer to the deepest longing of your heart, I think I'd do the same.

Some of us found our biological family to be a disappointment, but it was never intended to be your ultimate family. God wants everyone to be part of God's family. It's why Jesus was sent into this world. And a week ago, I suddenly realized why Jesus entered the world as a baby. I took my daughter to Target and as she was shopping, I was holding my grandson. I've never received so much attention in Target. Everyone wanted to see the baby – the people stocking the shelves wanted to see, people walked by and turned around to come back and see the baby, the cashier was more interested in seeing the baby than having us pay, walking to the car there were people who came out of their way to see the baby. I thought puppies were an attraction but nothing like a week old baby. People were drawn to infant Jesus – in the middle of the night, shepherds left their sheep to see the baby; magi traveled all the way from a foreign country to see the baby; he even got the attention of King Herod. God was trying and is still trying to draw us in. You need a family.

So, this is a series to look at what it means to be part of God's family. The writers of the New Testament had a phrase that is repeated throughout the New Testament. You already heard it this morning: "each other" or some translations say "one another." We all want to be one another-ed or each other-ed. **Keep peace with each other** (Mark 9:50); **Honor each other** (Romans 12:10); **Submit to each other** (Ephesians 5:21); **Be tolerant with each other;** **Forgive each other;** **Teach and warn each other** (Colossians 3:16); **Pray for each other** (James 5:16); **Love each other** (John 13:34)

It's a new way of family. What if the next time you referred to this church, you said instead, that's my family? Jesus never told anyone to go to church. He said, "Follow me." Belong to my family. How? Love each other. The best strategy that we have here at Messiah is called Faith Groups. And if you are not in one, I want to encourage you to get in one. Get into community. Get into a family. Even if you are watching online, we've tested a faith group online with people in various parts of the country and it works. So whether you are here in the room this morning or watching from some other part of the world, I want you to consider getting into the family.

How do we become family? **Carry each other's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ.** (Galatians 6:2) What's the law? Love each other! I think we know about physical burdens, but we also have spiritual burdens – and a lot of people are trying to carry them all by themselves when we were not designed to do this alone.

- *I read about a woman who phoned a friend and asked how she was doing. "Terrible," came the reply. "My head is splitting. My back and my legs are killing me. The house is a mess. The kids are driving me crazy. I feel so alone." Very sympathetically, the caller said, "You go and lie down and rest. I'm going to come over right away. I will cook lunch. I will clean up the house. I will take care of the children while you just get some rest. By the way, how is your husband, Sam?" The woman said, "Sam? My husband's name isn't Sam." "Oh, dear. I must have called the wrong number." A long pause. "Does this mean you're not coming over?"*

For a lot of people, no one is coming over. They don't have anyone to come over. We were not designed to carry burdens by ourselves. Something happens when we share with each other – the burden gets lighter. I meet with people all the time who describe what they are carrying and when they walk out of my office, they thank me. Their burden got lighter, and all I did was listen. You can do that. That's family.

One more way that we become family: **Welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you** (Romans 15:7) In other words, just as you are. And don't we all need that? Someplace where people are not trying to change us, correct us, judge us, but welcome us. Just love each other! Did I tell you that I'm a grandpa? We had a family gathering last Sunday and everyone wanted to hold my grandson, Basil. Holding him is the best therapy I've ever experienced. He came into the world two and half weeks ago. I knew nothing about him. He's never done anything for me, and I'm so crazy about him that I would do anything for him. Why? I am committed to his well-being. It's called love. It's not rational. It's love. On Tuesday afternoon I was in a meeting when Amanda sent me this video. Listen closely and you can hear the sounds he makes. [video] Isn't that wonderful? It's not rational. I have this commitment to Love each other. This is the family where we want to know you – and no matter what, we will love you anyway! To be fully known and loved anyway is the greatest thing in the world.

In a world where there are so many who are lonely, someone should invent a system where no one is lonely. And someone did, and his name is Jesus, and it is called the church. In the children's story, Swimmy was the only black fish in a sea of red fish. He did not belong and in the deep wet world of the ocean he was scared and lonely and very sad. But that was not the end of the story. His life was changed when that little black fish found belonging among the red fish. They were better together. They became family and together they carried each other's burdens. That's why I'm here this morning. I have learned that I need you more than you need me. Paul tells us: **In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other.** (Romans 12:5)

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 4, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Holy God, teach us to see ourselves as we really are. Sometimes we are not as kind as we could be with what we say to those we care about. We are not always respectful of each other, especially in our families. Grant us self-control, and fill us with kindness and compassion that we may love others as you love us. Amen.

Monday, August 5

Scripture: Acts 2:41-47

Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized. God brought about three thousand people into the community on that day.

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

Observation: On the morning of the Feast of Pentecost, Peter and the other apostles led a group of about 120 believers. At the end of the day, as the Holy Spirit worked through Peter's sermon and the other believers' testimonies, their "network" (i.e. community) numbered about 3,120! And more people kept joining daily – a growth rate even Facebook or Google could envy!

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? What appeals to you about the connectedness pictured in this passage? What practical problems do you think might have arisen in shaping these first Christians into a true “*koinonia*” (fellowship)?

Prayer: Thank you, dear God, for the presence of your Holy Spirit with the power to draw me into community with others who would follow you. Help me to see your Spirit at work in my life and in others. Amen.

Tuesday, August 6

Scripture: Psalm 32:1-11

The one whose wrongdoing is forgiven, whose sin is covered over, is truly happy! The one the LORD doesn't consider guilty — in whose spirit there is no dishonesty — that one is truly happy! When I kept quiet, my bones wore out; I was groaning all day long — every day, every night! — Because your hand was heavy upon me. My energy was sapped as if in a summer drought. *Selah.* So I admitted my sin to you; I didn't conceal my guilt. “I'll confess my sins to the LORD,” is what I said. Then you removed the guilt of my sin. *Selah.* That's why all the faithful should pray to you during troubled times, so that a great flood of water won't reach them. You are my secret hideout! You protect me from trouble. You surround me with songs of rescue! *Selah.* I will instruct you and teach you about the direction you should go. I'll advise you and keep my eye on you. Don't be like some senseless horse or mule, whose movement must be controlled with a bit and a bridle. Don't be anything like that! The pain of the wicked is severe, but faithful love surrounds the one who trusts the LORD. You who are righteous, rejoice in the LORD and be glad! All you whose hearts are right, sing out in joy!

Observation: Many scholars believe this psalm reflects King David's experience. He covered up his sinful affair with Bathsheba, killed her husband to maintain the cover-up, and then confessed at the prompting of Nathan the prophet. Psalm 32 brings the community of God's people into all of this. “All the faithful” pray in verse 6, and again verse 11 invites all of God's people to sing in praise of God's forgiving love.

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? Do you trust God enough to be honest with him? David found that “faithful love surrounds the one who trusts the LORD.” Are there persons in your life with whom you can be totally honest and transparent? Are you able to be that trustworthy person for someone else?

Prayer: Gracious God, hold me close and help me to see what you see in me. Help me to trust your faithful love and to be vulnerable and transparent within your community so that your forgiveness might be complete. Let me be your witness to forgiveness and love. Amen.

Wednesday, August 7

Scripture: Hebrews 10:19-25

Brothers and sisters, we have confidence that we can enter the holy of holies by means of Jesus' blood, through a new and living way that he opened up for us through the curtain, which is his body, and we have a great high priest over God's house. Therefore, let's draw near with a genuine heart with the certainty that our faith gives us, since our hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies are washed with pure water. Let's hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promises is reliable. And let us

consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. Don't stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.

Observation: The early believers urgently needed one another's love and support. They faced severe persecution and hatred for their faith (Hebrews 10:32-36). The writer of Hebrews wrote, "Let's think about how to motivate each other to show love and do good works. Don't stop meeting together with other believers."

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? In *The Message*, verses 19-20 read, "We can now—without hesitation—walk right up to God, into 'the Holy Place.' Jesus has cleared the way by the blood of his sacrifice." In what ways has Jesus' gift of forgiveness and salvation through the cross given you confidence to move from guilt-motivated worship to "walking right up to God"?

Prayer: Lord, you promised that wherever two or more gather in your name, you are present. Thank you for the way I sense your presence as I worship with others. Help me to be a motivating presence for others who seek your direction in their lives. Amen.

Thursday, August 8

Scripture: Hebrews 12:1, 18-24

So then, with endurance, let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up.

You haven't drawn near to something that can be touched: a burning fire, darkness, shadow, a whirlwind, a blast of a trumpet, and a sound of words that made the ones who heard it beg that there wouldn't be one more word. They couldn't stand the command, *if even a wild animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned*. The sight was so frightening that Moses said, "I'm terrified and shaking!" But you have drawn near to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem, to countless angels in a festival gathering, to the assembly of God's firstborn children who are registered in heaven, to God the judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous who have been made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks better than Abel's blood.

Observation: The early Christian churches didn't have big buildings, amazing music or video clips on big screens. Most of them were house churches, meeting in someone's home with perhaps 10 to 20 people they saw every week. The letter to the Hebrews reminded them that these small groups of ordinary people who met to worship were part of something huge and eternal.

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? The next time you worship, think of the "great cloud of witnesses." Use your imagination to see Jesus, the angels and witnesses sitting among the congregation. In what ways does the idea of your worship being part of this parade of witnesses to God's love add meaning to the ordinary meetings, large or small, in which you participate?

Prayer: Eternal God, Thank you for all of the faithful who have gone before me. Help me to see my life as a continuation of the work you began in their lives. Use me to move your people ever closer to your desired kingdom. Amen.

Friday, August 9

Scripture: 1 Peter 3:8-16

Finally, all of you be of one mind, sympathetic, lovers of your fellow believers, compassionate, and modest in your opinion of yourselves. Don't pay back evil for evil or insult for insult. Instead, give blessing in return. You were called to do this so that you might inherit a blessing. For those who want to love life and see good days should keep their tongue from evil speaking and their lips from speaking lies. They should shun evil and do good; seek peace and chase after it. The Lord's eyes are on the righteous and his ears are open to their prayers. But the Lord cannot tolerate those who do evil. Who will harm you if you are zealous for good? But happy are you, even if you suffer because of righteousness! Don't be terrified or upset by them. Instead, regard Christ the Lord as holy in your hearts. Whenever anyone asks you to speak of your hope, be ready to defend it. Yet do this with respectful humility, maintaining a good conscience. Act in this way so that those who malign your good lifestyle in Christ may be ashamed when they slander you.

Observation: Some scholars believe 1 Peter reflects the early Christian church's baptismal teaching. In the Roman Empire, the early Christians were often threatened and ridiculed. Peter urged them to live lives of true compassion, humility and love. Then, he said, when others ask, "Why do you live with such hope and conviction?" be ready to give them an answer.

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? Consider these three questions. 1) Why do people need Jesus Christ? 2) Why do people need the church? 3) Why do people need Messiah Church? How would you answer those questions in ways that could communicate your hope and faith to a non-religious friend?

Prayer: Stir up in me, O God, the assurance of your faithfulness and love. Renew in me the awareness of what you continue to do in and through me. May others see and hear in me your greatness and mercy. Amen.

Saturday, August 10

Scripture: Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. They cried out with a loud voice: "Victory belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." All the angels stood in a circle around the throne, and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell facedown before the throne and worshipped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and always. Amen." Then one of the elders said to me, "Who are these people wearing white robes, and where did they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." Then he said to me, "These people have come out of great hardship. They have washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb's blood. This is the reason they are before God's throne. They worship him day and night in his temple, and the one seated on the throne will shelter them. They won't hunger or thirst anymore. No sun or scorching heat will beat down on them, because the Lamb who is in the

midst of the throne will shepherd them. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Observation: The writer of Revelation was sent into exile for his faith on the small island of Patmos, isolated from the Christian churches he led. Yet he produced an awesome work of praise and vision. At its heart was the scene of “a great crowd that no one could number... from every nation, tribe, people and language” praising Jesus as the Lamb of God. Whatever barriers humans create between people, Revelation said, Jesus will ultimately surmount them all.

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? Jesus called his followers to have the same positive impact on our world as light in a dark place. In what ways is your life brighter because of God’s love, forgiveness and presence with you? In what ways do you live to brighten the lives of others?

Prayer: Your love, O God, is new and fresh every morning. Help me to embrace your love once again. Move me to show forth your love in a world that can be so dark and lonesome. Lord, what is mine to do? Amen.