

# November 10, 2019

## The Good News of Belonging

### Acts 2:36-47

*"Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41). Peter preached an average sermon and wow. Things happened. Why? What is going on here?*

The gist of Peter's message is this: Jesus was crucified on the cross, rose from the dead, and has now poured out His Spirit on His people. Our response is to "repent." To repent originally meant to give "a second thought." It implies our first thought is wrong: thinking we can save ourselves and make ourselves better on our own isn't working for us. To repent came to mean to have a change of mind. To realize we need God's help to deal with our issues. That kind of humility can be difficult for us. But ...

***When we repent, something happens to the PAST – our sin, guilt, and shame are forgiven.*** Our relationship with God is restored. Think of when you were a child and you did something bad; it created an invisible barrier with your parents. When we go and say we're sorry, our parents hugged us, and the old relationship is restored.

***When we repent, something happens in the PRESENT– we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*** The Spirit gives us the power we need to win the battles we never thought we could win, to resist the temptations we never thought we could resist, to gradually become the people we never thought we would be. We live differently.

***When we repent, something else happens in the PRESENT – we belong.*** We are part of a community of people who belong to God and who belong to one another. We are a community who share the same common experience of faith, forgiveness, and hope in Jesus. We live differently.

***You Belong. I Belong. We ALL Belong.***

We live in a world where people do not belong. We live in a world filled with voices that shout: *"You are no good; you are worthless; you're all on your own; you think differently than I do, therefore you must be wrong; you don't belong; you 'belong' only if you have something of value, if you have something I want."* We live in a world that judges. That divides. That bullies. That lies. These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them.

In Acts 2, people who followed Jesus were automatically part of a fellowship/a community/a church. In the New Testament church is not a "what" – a thing – it is a "who" – a community of people who believe in Jesus, learn together, worship together, love together, pray together, serve together, and are on a mission together – to bring God's love, mercy, and grace to our broken, hurting world. There is a great quality of "togetherness." That was the source of their strength, corporately, and individually.

When we ignore community, we can find our faith isolated, lonely, and unfulfilling.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a "fellowship of the ring" – a bizarre and unlikely conglomeration of cast-offs, strong personalities, people-too-weak-to-amount-to-much, people with flaws. But they have one thing in common – a cause. A conviction. A mission. In their case, to use their odd mix of gifts, strengths, weaknesses, and abilities to destroy the Dark Lord and establish a world of hope. There is no one hero. Everyone belongs. Everyone is important. Everyone has a role to play.

The church is just as unlikely a "fellowship of the Lord." We are unlikely conglomeration of cast-offs, strong personalities, people-too-weak-to-amount-to-much, and people with flaws. But we have one thing in common – we know Jesus. We are filled with the Spirit. Together, using our various gifts, strengths, and abilities, we can overcome the darkness and help establish God's Kingdom in our community and around the world.

In the Bible there is no examples of solitary saints or Lone Ranger Christians. From the very beginning, people belong to this Jesus-ordained (Matthew 16:13-18), Spirit-filled community of believers (Acts 2:1-13). We are part "the family of God" – God is our Father, we are His children, brothers and sisters together. We belong. We are God's Temple – like stones built together with one another to become a beautiful, functional Temple, filled with the Spirit, the personal presence of God. We belong. We are the "body of Christ," arms, legs, hand, feet, ears, toes, elbows and eyelids all serving together to be the presence of Jesus in our world. We are "the church." We belong.

Jesus' vision for the church – God's people, called out, called together, is to continue His mission to share His good news of forgiveness, love, mercy, justice, peace, hope, and grace – together. That common identity and purpose unites us across racial lines, generational lines, gender lines, educational lines, social status lines, and ability lines. The church is people from ALL nations coming together around a cause so much bigger than any one ethnic group or demographic. The church is people from EVERY tribe and EVERY nation together, belonging, worshipping, and serving God (Revelation 7:9-10).

***Together, we belong to a learning church (2:42).*** I hope. Together, we are all following Jesus on a lifelong journey of discovery. We look toward the sunrise, appreciating that each day God can teach us new things from His Word, by His Spirit, among His people. Without constant, lifelong learning, we can revert to the worldview or mindset of the surrounding culture and end up with their minds shaped by whatever social pressures are most persuasive. Rather than Jesus being our growing edge, He becomes a pale memory. Take advantage of opportunities to belong and to learn.

***Together, we belong to a worshipping church (2:42, 46).*** I hope. When we worship and break bread together, we raise a flag which says, "Jesus' death and resurrection are the centre of everything. Nothing is the same anymore." Worship together is important. Just as there is a dynamic that comes from being part of a crowd at a concert or a game, something happens when we come together to worship. When we ignore corporate worship, our sense of God and being the people of God shrinks. It

is more difficult to express praise and gratitude when we're always alone.

***Together, we belong to a praying church (2:42).*** I hope. As the first followers of Jesus met together, they knew they couldn't deal with life in their own strength. The challenges were overwhelming: ridicule, discrimination, abuse, persecution. They also knew they didn't need to make it on their own. They knew God's Spirit was among them. They knew they could meet life's challenges head on when they first met with God. When we ignore prayer, we forget we have a restored relationship with our heavenly Father. We ignore the power of the Spirit in our lives. We choose to face life alone rather than strengthened by the God of the Galaxies. Just do it – pray!

***Together, we belong to a reverent church (2:43).*** I hope. The church was filled with a sense of awe and wonder, because this was a church where things happened. The presence of God was tangible. This was true, not just when the church was gathered together, but when the church was scattered too. We can see God at work anywhere and everywhere – if we choose to observe. When we ignore awe and wonder, God is simply a doctrine not a Presence. How do you see God at work?

***Together, we belong to a caring church (2:44-45).*** I hope. The first followers of Jesus had an intense feeling of responsibility for one another, the poor, the marginalized, and the suffering. And they did something about it. What shocked the Romans about the early Christians was their radical care for anyone and everyone in ways that shamed the Roman authorities and their religious leaders. When we ignore compassion, we are nothing more than a social club with little credible witness in society. How do we care?

***Together, we belong to a joyful church (2:46).*** I hope. Joy is not all smiles and giggles. In the Bible, joy is a deep-seated, calm confidence, based on the certain knowledge that our lives are in God's hands. Even though we walk through the darkest valleys, we need not be afraid. He never leaves us alone. He always gets us through. When we don't have that joy, we have little genuine hope to offer a hurting world. That joy comes from choosing to live in the assurance of His promise and His strength.

***Together, we belong to a church people cannot help liking (2:47).*** I hope. There's an old-fashioned word I recently ran across: winsomeness. The definition of winsomeness is having a pleasing and engaging character, because of charm and innocence. We are simply nice people. We are loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled people (Galatians 5:22-23). Are we?

If we are being the church, we belong to a community in which all people are welcome. We are united together by a bond of blood – the blood of Jesus. We are united together by a common identity – people saved by Jesus and empowered by the Spirit of God within us. What unites us are far more important than the things that divide us.

***Together, we belong to a real church.*** The church is people. People are messy. Thus church is messy. People – saved by Jesus – still struggle with selfishness, pride, anger, and all those not-so-good things. The Bible is not a story of an idealized church

where everything works perfectly all the time. Paul and Peter argue. Paul gets angry with Mark and stomps off. Wealthier Christians don't want to help poorer Christians.

There have been times in my life when I have been ticked off at church. I have been hurt by church. I have been disillusioned by church. Actually, the church didn't do anything. "The church" is not a person who can do things to me. The church is people. **People** can do nasty things; the church can't. So more accurately, there have been times when I've been ticked off by **people** in the church, when I have been hurt by **people** in the church, and when I have been disappointed by **people** in the church. People – even people in church, loved by God, saved by Jesus, with His Spirit – can still do dumb things, selfish things, hurtful things, wrong things, even downright nasty things.

When people don't act like Jesus would act, I can write off "church" and walk away. But we, all together, are the church. We all belong. And if we, all together, have issues, we, all together, need to deal with them. We all belong. If I don't "like" church, I'm part of the problem, too. Honestly, I often blow it. I can say and do hurtful things. I can fail to do or say what is right and good. I can be part of the problem. There have been times when I've been the one ticking people off, hurting others, and letting other people down.

If "the church" has issues (and we do!), I am as much a part of the solution as anyone else, too. We need all the wisdom, help, energy, and enthusiasm we can get. We have a BIG mission that needs us all. I need to grow in maturity, character, and ability as I put my shoulder to the wheel and help out – that happens in community, in church.

David Watson writes, *"The church must above all things be loving and unjudging towards a sinful, apathetic, and even hostile world. Far from an attitude which criticizes and condemns the godless, the church must humbly acknowledge that its own moral and spiritual condition is anything but perfect and in constant need of correction and renewal. It must be a church which is always experiencing afresh the joy of God's forgiveness, which never ceases to wonder at the steadfast love and unceasing mercy of the Lord, and which longs to encourage others to 'taste and see that the Lord is gracious'"* (p.58).

A story goes that when Jesus ascended to heaven an angel asked him what would happen next. Jesus said He'd left a dozen or so people with the task of continuing the work He had started. The angel asked who these humans were and what they were like. Jesus told the angel about Peter and his temper, Thomas and his doubts, two brothers, James and John, who were always fighting, Matthew the tax collector, and the rest. These people, Jesus said, would continue His mission. The angel was quiet for a moment. Then he said to Jesus, "And what is your backup plan?" Guess what? There is still no back up plan. There's just us (empowered, led, and inspired by God's Spirit). Let's be God's learning, worshipping, praying, reverent, caring, joyful people. And guess what? You belong. You are part of God's plan.

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