
Holding Us Together

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Epiphany 3 – Year A

What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Has Christ been divided?

We want to belong. We all have the desire to belong.

The people of Corinth belong to different groups: Some belong to Paul, some belong to Apollos, some belong to Cephas, and others belong to Christ. This sense of belonging has created divisions in Corinth. Paul asks, “Has Christ been divided?”

Today, I want to talk about three things: 1. What it means to belong. 2. What it feels like to not belong. 3. How do we cross those barriers?

First: What it means to belong.

We want to belong. We join book clubs, churches, civic organizations, country clubs, gyms, and schools because we want to belong. We have a desire to belong and enjoy the feeling of belonging.

Let me give you an example: My high school had 2000 students, thus I had a desire and a need belong. So, I joined the wrestling team.

If you were on the high school wrestling team you had a sense of belonging. Most of us had same haircut, a two guard or three guard, depending on how short your mother would allow you to cut it.

We would arrive to school at 7 a.m. to lift weights and train. We would show up to our 8 o'clock class wearing one of our wrestling sweatshirts, just to make sure our classmates knew we were part of the team. We sat together at lunch, where our plates were stacked with salad, turkey breast, and low fat dressing. We looked like we were a part of Weight Watchers, because we were weight watchers!

We spent our afternoons practicing in the wrestling room and our weekends at wrestling meets. We were a team, a tight group that belonged together.

I imagine you have had a similar experience of belonging. Whether it is a group or an organization, belonging is a wonderful thing. It is something to celebrate.

Second: Because we have a sense of belonging, we also have a sense of “not belonging.” Think back to a time where you felt you didn't belong.

Maybe you were a minority, or of a different political opinion. Maybe you moved to a new city, or were starting a new job. Whatever the case you felt like you didn't have much in common with those around you. The feeling of not belonging is uncomfortable. And if you are like me, you want to remove yourself from the situation as quickly as possible.

Let me share a personal story of not belonging: During my final semester at Yale Divinity School, I decided “that I was going to get my money’s worth.” So, I signed up for a class on the writing of German philosopher Georg Friedrich Hegel.

The first class was an introduction to Hegel’s philosophy and I recognized only one divinity student in the class of ten. That was the first clue that I didn’t belong.

During the second class we started discussing the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, and it became clear everyone (but yours truly) had already studied Hegel. That was the second clue that I didn’t belong.

During the third class, I noticed my copy of Hegel’s writings (purchased at the divinity school bookstore) was different most of my classmates. When I looked over a shoulder or two, I noticed my classmates were reading the text in German, because they were all doctoral students in philosophy or theology. That was my third and final clue that I didn’t belong.

When the lecture concluded, I hung around and let the professor know that I didn’t belong in in a class full of doctoral students studying philosophy and theology at Yale. I was studying to be a parish priest and I didn’t need to fail this class and miss out on my ordination and new job.

I apologized for signing up for this course, and told him I belonged in another class, something like “Basket Weaving in the Old Testament.”

The professor laughed and agreed, “Wallace, you don’t belong in this class, but you need to stay in it.

“You need to sit at the table and learn from a group of students who don’t share your faith and theological positions, and these students need your voice at the table, the voice of a parish priest. So, you don’t belong, but I want you to stay.”

Sitting at a table where I didn’t belong was one of the best decisions I ever made.

Which brings me to my final point: How do we cross those barriers?

Paul says we cross these barriers by turning to the cross: *The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

Yes, the Jewish Christians belong to Cephas, and the Gentile Christians belong to Paul, and the philosophers belong to Apollos, but Paul wants the Corinthians to see that the cross holds them together.

One of the great theologians of the South was an Episcopalian by the name of William Porcher Dubose. Dubose, writing after the Civil War, understood what Paul was trying to convey to the Corinthians. Here is what he wrote:

“Contraries do not necessarily contradict, nor need opposites always oppose. What we want is not to surrender or abolish our differences, but to unite and compose them. We need the truth of every variant opinion and the light from every opposite point of view” (from *The Gospel in the Gospels* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1906, page ix).

The cross holds together contraries that seem to contradict and opposites that seem to oppose.

This weekend we were reminded our country belongs to different groups. Some groups were celebrating the inauguration on Friday, while others were marching on Saturday.

Like Corinth, we live in a moment in time when contraries and opposites are struggling to live together.

That is why a place like the Cathedral of St. Philip is so important to our future. We believe in the power of the cross.

Jesus says, “And I when I am lifted up will draw all people to myself.” The Cathedral is a house of prayer for all people.

The Cathedral is composed of people “from every variant opinion and every opposite point of view.”

We do not seek to surrender or abolish our differences; instead, we seek to be a community of holy relationship, a community where contraries and opposites come to a deeper understanding of God’s truth.

Pilate asks Jesus, “What is truth?” Jesus doesn’t respond. Instead, Jesus is nailed to the cross. Truth is found on the cross,

where opposites and contradictions are held together.

The cross is what holds us together. Paul writes, *The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

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