

BELONGING TO JESUS  
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in Brookfield, Connecticut  
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Texts: Psalm 23 & John 10:11-18

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

John 10:11-18

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

**W**hat does belonging feel like to you? What do you think of when you hear that word? My family moved around a lot when I was growing up, so I never really had a strong sense of belonging. To this day, when people ask me where I'm from, I'm not really sure what to tell them. I was born in Pittsburgh, but I mostly grew up in Baltimore, although I haven't been there in twenty years, and I don't feel much of a connection to it anymore.

The other week, though, when my daughter and I were driving back from visiting my parents in Wisconsin, we stopped in Pittsburgh and had dinner with my Aunt Elaine and Uncle Joe and some of my cousins. We met them at a place called the Regina Elina, which is a private social club in Sharpsburg, where my father's side of the family is from. Sharpsburg is just across the river from Pittsburgh, and it's where a lot of Italian immigrants settled around the turn of the century, including my great-grandfather. So my family has been there for well over a hundred years, and starting with my grandparents, we've been members of the Regina Elina since the 1940s.

So Mimi and I got there just as my aunt and uncle were pulling up, and we all gave each other hugs out in the parking lot. We hadn't seen them in eight or nine years. Then we went inside, and my cousin, Lisa, gave us a tour of the kitchen. She has a catering business, and a few years ago she worked out a deal with the club owners, where she handles the food, and they do the rest. Pretty soon a bunch of my other cousins showed up, some of whom Mimi had never met. Then we all sat down at a big table and had dinner. And while we were eating and talking and showing each other pictures on our phones, I had that sense of belonging, that sense of rootedness, that sense of being part of a place.

Okay, so what about the opposite of belonging? What do you think of when you

hear a word like "outsider" or "stranger"? I think of what it felt like to be in middle school, when I was painfully self-conscious and uncomfortable in my own body. I think of what it felt like to walk into the cafeteria and not have a place to sit. I think of what it felt like to be one of the last kids in gym class to get picked for the team.

I also think about an experience I had when I was in seminary. I was hired by a woman to visit her ninety-something-year-old father in a nursing home for a few hours a week. His name was Harry, and sometimes I'd read the newspaper to him. Sometimes I'd take him out for a drive. He loved milkshakes, so I'd take him to Arby's and get him a vanilla shake, and we'd cruise around for a while. I did that for about a year before Harry died, and my wife and I went to his funeral.

I felt a little bit awkward because I didn't know anyone there besides Harry's daughter, and I really didn't know her that well. Plus, the family was Jewish, and I'd never been to a Jewish service of any kind, and I was worried about doing something wrong and offending everybody. So when we got to the graveside, someone handed me a yarmulke, and I didn't know if I should put it on or not because I'm not Jewish, and I didn't know if there was a rule about that. So I leaned over and whispered to Daisy, "What do I do?," and apparently I was a little too loud because the rabbi turned to me and snapped, "It's a sign of respect before God." I've never felt like more of an outsider. I've never felt so out-of-place or unwelcome.

**I**m sure you've all had your own experiences of feeling like you belong somewhere and feeling like you don't belong somewhere, and that's helpful when it comes to thinking about both readings this morning.

Belonging is definitely a major theme in the gospel reading. Jesus claims his sheep as his own. He knows them, and they know

him. And he has other sheep that he's going to gather up and bring into his flock, so they'll belong to it, as well.

Belonging is also a theme in Psalm 23. The description of the Lord as our shepherd, who makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters, is deeply comforting. But it's also challenging. I read a commentary the other day where the author made the point that what's good about the Good Shepherd is that he makes people feel like they belong. He makes them feel like they're part of the flock. And the challenge for us is to live up to that example—to be good in the same sense, that we make others feel like they belong.

I'm sure we all agree that that's what we want—for everyone who comes through those doors to feel like they belong here, that they're part of this place, just like we are. But that means we have to do more than simply open our arms and welcome them in. To welcome someone is to invite them into our space, and that's a wonderful thing. That's what hospitality is all about. But baked into that mindset is the assumption that this is our space, not theirs.

So if we want people to feel like I felt when I was at the Regina Elina, as opposed to when I was at that funeral, we have to go beyond welcoming. We have to go beyond words like "host" and "guest," "member" and "visitor." We have to let go of those distinctions and create an atmosphere where everyone is invited to leave their mark on this place. We have to build a culture where everyone has a hand in shaping this community according to their ideas, their beliefs, their values. We have to make room for everyone to bring their whole self to the table. And that's really hard to do because it means giving up our sense of control. It means changing how we see the church and how we see each other. It means realizing that none of us owns this place—not me, not you, not the session. It means living into the

truth of these readings—the truth that we all belong to Jesus; the truth that we're all part of his flock, even those who aren't here right now, but will be when he brings them.

That's the real challenge, I guess, in a nutshell—to let ourselves be sheep, and not try to be the shepherd. That's one of the defining characteristics of sheep: they're followers. And I read something interesting about that the other day.

In her book, *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about what she learned from a friend of hers who grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest. Sheep aren't like cows, this person told her. Cows are herded from the rear. You get behind them and make a lot of noise and drive them forward. That doesn't work with sheep. Sheep are herded from the front. You get ahead of them and together they all follow you wherever you go.

That's what Jesus does for us. Instead of us trying to get ahead of each other, he gets ahead of all of us, and we all follow him wherever he goes. Amen.