

## **What Does it Mean to Belong to God?**

The Rev. Emily Given

St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA

May 12, 2024

Easter 7 Year B2

On Wednesday morning, I found myself in an unfortunate yet not all that surprising place. A distant family member posted something on Facebook and my curiosity got the better of me... so I responded. Normally, I place a fairly high value on not adding to the negative narrative on social media but there I was in the middle of it. Honestly, I was hip deep in it before I knew it.

This family member had reposted something originally shared by a group called the "Argumentative Atheist". Despite possessing a deep faith in the presence of God, my comment was not a criticism about being atheist. Instead, as a professional nature photographer, I was curious about her understanding of how the natural world came to be.

What ensued was a long train of messages that started while I was still in bed.... continued as I was brushing my teeth...popped up on the screen at stop lights on the way to the office, and continued as I prepared to head over to the day school for morning chapel services. Against my better judgment, I kept responding. I thought maybe one more response would be the key to understanding each other better but the more messages that were traded, the further apart we became. There was a deep sadness within me. My stomach hurt. My heart hurt. The anxiety rose in me about what the next family gathering might be like post facebook battle. But most of all I felt a sense of loneliness. Separation.

I sat staring at the screen and wondered... and wished for things that probably aren't really mine to wish.

I do not remember a time when I didn't know the presence of God in and through my life. (I can thank my parents and the incredible community of faith where I was raised for that.) To me that knowledge is a tremendous gift and a huge part of my identity. What would that feel like? What if I walked through this world without the meaning making of a God who creates, redeems, and accompanies me. Honestly, the thought was devastating.

It felt more so as I sat at my desk with the papers and books I was using for sermon prep spread out, filled with scribbled notes and the highlighted texts I wanted to share this morning. Scripture that included Peter reminding us that community in Christ matters as he continued to develop leadership among the disciples after Judas' death. Asking the question, who will carry on this work. Who will bear witness to the power of God in this world?

Also, God's promise in 1 John of everlasting life, a life that is rooted in Jesus.

And most of all John's portrayal of Jesus praying for his disciples before his arrest and death. On this last Sunday in the Season of Easter, we step back in time a little and see an intimate exchange between Jesus and God that was filled with such raw emotion. It maybe even draws our mind to other places in the gospels that detail Jesus' conversation with God in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he died. Jesus

rehashing all that he had done to glorify God in his earthly life and how he had cared for those he had been given.

This section of John is a portion of what is known as the “high priestly prayer” and it is one of the times when the content of Jesus’ prayer feels truly timeless. We get the sense that he is not just praying for the ones in his direct care at the moment but all of us. All who would come after. How this care is everlasting. How we belong to a God. This protection that Jesus spoke of is ours. This joy being made complete is ours.

I think what that social media spat made me consider is - what does it mean to me to belong to God? To know we belong to God.

What does it mean to you? To let that reality seep into your heart. To soak into your bones. To settle into your soul. We. Belong. To. God.

The other place the spirit was tugging on me this week was the Feast of the Ascension of Jesus observed in the church calendar this past Thursday. As people of faith, we place a great deal of emphasis on marking the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus together in our worship life. The ascension, Jesus’s bodily return to heaven, often gets glossed over or forgotten. I encourage us to remember it this morning. It is an important part of the life - death - resurrection - return movement that marks Jesus’ ministry among us.

Before his ascension to heaven, Jesus gathered the disciples together and coached them on what’s next. Jesus let them know he wasn’t always going to be physically present with them but that they would never be alone. The disciples

wondered if this was the time when Jesus would set everything right. Was this the time that he would make a full restoration and redemption of the brokenness they had known.

Jesus' answer. No. This work of restoration was going to be continued in them. It was their continued work to bear witness to the power of God in the world. Jesus told them to stay put in Jerusalem. Remember who they are. Wait for the gift that was already on the way. The gift that would accompany them. Jesus would need to return to God but the disciples would not be alone. We are not alone. The gift of the Holy Spirit as advocate, helper, comforter is ours. An ever present reminder that we belong.

For those who have seen me without all this gear, you may have noticed that I have a number of tattoos. (*Don't tell my mother!*) One that holds special significance to me is far from the most artistic. On my forearm, I have one verse from Isaiah. It is the visible way I remind myself that I am known by God and belong to God. It reads, "I have called you by your name. You are mine". Isaiah 43:1. You. Are. Mine.

The placement is intentional. It is like a shield that protects me from all the powers and messages that are designed to make me question that sense of love and belonging. To push back anything that seeks to make me forget that I am a beloved Child of God.

I wonder what you might surround yourself with to help you remember. Just like the disciples - you are loved, you are sacred (set apart), you are called... but it is easy to forget.

The disciples were left in an inbetween place. And so are we. We know that our new rector, Rick Morley, is on the way. (If you haven't watched his introduction video yet, be sure to check your email.) Just as Devon named last week - we are in the "now and the not yet" ... and it's hard but also ripe with possibility.

So what now? I think Jesus' coaching of the disciples has wisdom for us too.

Stay put.

Know who we are.

Trust that the gift of the Holy Spirit will continue to come.

The work begun in Jesus and his friends will be continued in us.

And we are will not be alone.

Amen.