

22 May 2016

Belonging

Deuteronomy 7:7-11; John 15:12-25

Deuteronomy is presented as a series of speeches made by Moses just before his death to the Hebrew refugees from Egypt, while they were still in the desert without a land of their own. Despite all that, though, God repeatedly assures the homeless people that they belong to him. We read chapter 7, verses 7-11:

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and who repays in their own person those who reject him. He does not delay but repays in their own person those who reject him. Therefore, observe diligently the commandment – the statutes and the ordinances – that I am commanding you today.

As Deuteronomy was Moses' final words to the people he had led through the desert, John 15 is part of Jesus' final words to those who had followed him through his ministry on earth. And like Moses, Jesus stresses that as few as they are, and whatever hardships they face, his disciples belong to him:

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

'If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "Servants are not greater than their master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It was to fulfil the word that is written in their law, "They hated me without a cause."

What we have in these two passages is a recurring theme of scripture, this notion that God has a "chosen people" – a particular group that has a special relationship to the divine, a group that is

different from the world surrounding it. We see that idea in Deuteronomy 7: God brought Israel out of slavery, not because they were bigger, or more virtuous, than anyone else but simply because God loved them. In fact, this is a key theme of the entire Torah, which repeats over and over: “I will be your God, and you will be my people,” calls them to be separate from the nations that currently live in the Promised Land, and establishes the laws that set them apart: Sabbath observance, for instance, and circumcision. God has a special people, and they are to be *different*.

But it isn't just the Old Testament. In our reading from John 15, we heard Jesus use similar language with his disciples. Where in Deuteronomy, God said, “I have loved you,” in John Jesus says, “I have called you my friends.” Where the Exodus tells how God brought Israel out of Egypt, Jesus says that he has called his followers “out of the world.” Where the Torah says that Israel is to separate itself from the nations, Jesus warns his disciples that the world will hate them, because they are different. As I said, this “chosen people” idea is everywhere in scripture.

Even if we don't always like it. This favoritism is one of the things that often disturbs us, isn't it? It's the exclusivity of it – Only *my* group is loved by God! – and it doesn't feel either just or compassionate. After all – let's face it – I am a Christian today largely because I was born to devout Christian parents who, themselves, had devout Christian parents. If my parents had been devout Muslims, I might have been preaching in a mosque last Friday. Would God reject me then? Because I was born to the wrong family? That's not fair. I'll come back to this in a minute, but first let's spend some time on why being a part of a chosen group seems to be so important.

I want you to imagine something with me. You are fourteen years old, and your parents have just moved to a new town, far away from everyone you know. It's the middle of the school year, and today is your first day in your new middle school. How do you feel? Very alone, right? And very conspicuous. You feel as if everyone is looking at you, but you aren't sure, because you're carefully not making eye contact. You want to look as if you're confident and know what to do, but you aren't and you don't. You don't know where to sit in your classes, because you're afraid you'll sit in someone else's seat. The teachers make a point of welcoming you, and you wish they'd just be quiet and not draw everyone's attention to you. The cafeteria at lunch is worst of all. You sit by yourself, and everyone around you seems to know everyone else and have their own group of friends. You simply don't belong, and you know it, and it's a horrible feeling. You hate your new school.

Now, imagine ahead a bit. You've been at your new school a couple of weeks, still hating every minute, and then one day at lunch, a girl you've seen in a couple of your classes invites you to sit with her group. You do, and you discover several people there who like some of the same things you do. You get involved in a spirited discussion of that shared interest, and when lunch is over, one of the group calls you by name and says, “See you tomorrow.” Now how do you feel? Your world has just been renewed, hasn't it? Suddenly, you don't hate school any more. What made that incredible difference? You have a group now, where you are welcome and accepted. You are not alone.

One more step. Skip ahead four years. You're a high school senior now, and it feels an eternity since that horrible two weeks of not belonging. You're one of the most popular people in school, a good student, president of a club, a varsity athlete, and basically just a nice person.

Everyone knows your name, and everyone likes you. Do you still need a group? Yes, you still do. *Even then*, even universally liked, you need the sense of belonging to a group. The only difference is that now you belong to many different groups, so that nearly everywhere you go, you're a part of a group. And that's good, because when you know you're part of a distinct group, you can relax. That's simply how we humans roll. We were created not just to be, but to belong.

Now I used adolescence in my example because that's the time when we feel most acutely the need for belonging. For a teen, that need is overwhelming, and so it's not surprising that the typical faith of adolescence is all about being a part of a community of faith. But we adults feel the same things – when we start a new job, move to a new neighborhood, visit a new church – and we are all happier when we know we belong. That's where Deuteronomy 7 and John 15 speak to us: they remind us that we belong to God, and to the group that belongs to God. In the community of those who also trust and serve God, we find our deepest belonging. Now, for some of us, that belonging is the essence of our faith. These are the people for whom faith and the faith community are nearly the same thing; they themselves grow in the context of the group, and their particular ministry is welcoming others into this place of acceptance and love.

Maybe you recognize yourself in that description, as a person whose faith is centered in the community. If so, you have much to teach the rest of us. I talked two weeks ago about people for whom the central faith experience is that of wonder and awe in the presence of beauty or another sign of God's presence. This is a genuine path of faith, but it's not enough. We need others. We need the group. Without the community of faith, our wonder easily begins to revolve around *us*, around our own feelings. Last week I talked about a different kind of faith journey, one centered on clarity, understanding, and active obedience to rules. And this too is an important path, but again, it's not enough. We still need the community, to keep our lives of active obedience and service from becoming lives of self-satisfied righteousness that are based on doing good works. The thing that keeps our faith from becoming all about us is love, and love is only possible in community. Remember that first day of school I had you imagine? That day, feeling that you didn't belong anywhere, you were utterly and obsessively focused on yourself. But when we know that we belong, know that we are loved, only then are we free to love God and others.

Now I have to conclude with a warning. There is a dark side to the faith based on belonging. It is, as I've already mentioned, the danger of exclusivity. Let's go back to that imaginary middle school. At last, two months after starting there, you are a part of a group. You belong. Now I have two questions. First, how do you and your group talk about the other groups that are around you? Do you sneer at them, criticize them, look down on them (if they are lower in the middle school pecking order) or resent them (if they are higher)? Because that's one evil tendency of groups: to magnify their own worth by sneering at other groups, to pretend that they are the *only* good group. And my second question is this: what do you do when you look up one day and see someone else sitting alone in the cafeteria, someone you've never seen before? Do you thank God that isn't you any more? Or do you go over and say, "Come sit with us"?

Yes, we are chosen by God, but we are chosen for a purpose. God chose Israel as a special people *so that they could communicate it to others*. They were to be a "light to the nations." The prophets Amos and Isaiah say bluntly that God has been just as active in working

with other nations. Just because God loves one group does not mean that God *only* loves one. And when you read the passage in John that stresses that the disciples are Jesus' special friends, different from and hated by the "world," please don't make too much of that word "world," as if everyone outside the church is the enemy. Remember that the Gospel of John also says this: "For God so *loved* the world . . ." Yes, we need our groups. It is how we are wired. We need to know that we belong, but never so that we can look down on outsiders. Rather we are called into community so that, having experienced love there, we can give it more freely.