

Belonging (Part Two)

“Left everything and followed him”

Reflection 15 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Jesus rather than seeking out people who had their doctrine and behavior all squared away and then allowing them to be with him invited fishermen by the Sea of Galilee simply to follow him. Scripture says that they “left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:11). And then as a postscript, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, and “Levi got up, left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:27-28). These are rich texts, and they ask of me an important question: If I were to leave everything and follow Jesus, what would be the everything I would leave?

But note how following Jesus back then, back at the beginning, began simply with belonging. You just got up and followed. And then what? Did Jesus’ followers sit around a fire and listen to lectures on doctrine? No, they listened to stories that taught them how to behave, how to best act in this world, and they learned to take care of the sick, to feed the hungry, to pray, to wash feet, to serve, to love, to forgive. And this belonging and behavior opened up for them a whole new vision of God, a whole new experience of God in this world. And so from belonging and behavior came beliefs that made sense in the light of their new-found belonging and behavior.

They came over time to see: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself not counting people’s sins against them, that this living God is the Savior of all people, and that we live in a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of this God, an enchanted and enchanting world where grace reigns, where somehow in absolutely all things God works for our good, and so our very lives expand and fill to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now this is part of the great good news because what people today seek is a place to belong – in the words of the 1980s TV show “Cheers,” a place “where everybody knows your name.” Some of you may remember that show, set in a bar named Cheers in Boston where locals met to drink, relax and socialize, and you may recall the words to its theme song.

Making your way in the world today
takes everything you’ve got.
Taking a break from all your worries,
sure would help a lot.
Wouldn’t you like to get away?
Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name,
and they’re always glad you came.
You wanna be where you can see,
our trouble are all the same
You wanna be where everybody knows
your name.
You wanna go where people know,
people are all the same,
You wanna go where everybody knows

your name.

Spiritualizing it only a bit, people need a place to belong, where they can find spiritual friends, not just potluck-eating acquaintances, but spiritual friends with whom they can share their life of faith and their struggles, their joys and their sorrows, their fears and their dreams, friends who know them as they are, with whom they can completely open and honest, and with whom they can begin to really experience the grace and acceptance and forgiveness that are at the heart of the gospel, friends you see often and can count on. People need a place where everyone counts, everyone matters, a great joyous family under God, a place where we see worship in the eyes of one another.

I for sure need spiritual friends with whom I can be completely honest, completely myself; with whom I can share my struggles, my pain, the way sin catches me; whom I can trust, who will treat what they learn about me with sacred respect, who will not look down on me, who will not impose their will or judgment on me, whom I can count on seeing often, very often, who share with me their struggles, pain, the way sin catches them, but who see not just the sin, but the way the Spirit is working in my life; who take my pulse; who encourage me on to spiritual excellence, who have confidence I can do it when I'm not so sure; who in times of tragedy and disaster gather around me; whom I can count on.

This whole sense of belonging played out beautifully in the 1992 comedy *Sister Act* starring Whoopi Goldberg as Deloris Wilson, a former lounge singer who sees a mob murder and is placed in the witness protection program as “a nun” in a convent in a run-down neighborhood in San Francisco. She of course isn't a perfect fit for the convent and gets into run-ins with the Reverend Mother. So she's put in the choir, but when the choir nuns realize she can really sing, they elect her to take over as choir director. And fun breaks out everywhere! Traditional music shifts toward rock-and-roll, and the unorthodox music brings the people, including teenagers, in off the streets. The church begins to fill, but it's not just that. Deloris persuades the others to go out into the streets and help clean up the neighborhood. Even the Reverend Mother gets it, and as the convent opened up to the community they had been trying to protect themselves from, as they began to see things in new ways, as they learned to “embrace” essentially everyone, people – lots and lots of people – opened up to what was going on inside the convent.

That's the way belonging works. When it comes first. That's the way following Jesus works. If we do it as it was done in the beginning.

We are called to be a band of brothers and sisters, soul brothers and sisters, spiritual companions engaged in the greatest adventure life offers, spiritual friends who can count on one another, bound together not by enforced uniformity but by the one Spirit of God who makes us all one. We are called to belonging to God and to one another, to learning to behave in light of this belonging, and learning and teaching those beliefs that follow naturally from this new life-transforming, life-enhancing belonging and behavior.

My friend who feels he must be exactly like us in belief and practice before he can belong need wait no longer. The world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of God, this enchanted and enchanting world, is his for the taking – and with all the joy and life that just comes with it. And

with companions with whom he can stand firm and whom he can count on. This coming great awakening begins when church opens up to others, and those to whom church has opened up open up to church. Which they will.

– Dale Pauls