

Palm Harbor United Methodist Church
Rev. Sharon Patch
WANT TO BELONG?
ROMANS 12:1-13

Do you remember when you were a kid and you had a secret club? There was a secret code and maybe even a secret handshake or a secret language. As you got older, it wasn't a club maybe but a group of friends...friends you hung out with and people you knew you could count on. They were your buds and they knew all your secrets...or at least most of them.

When I was a young teenager, I moved to a new town and my parents insisted that I become a Rainbow Girl. Now, don't laugh. This was a group for daughters of men who belonged to the Masonic Lodge. My dad was a Mason and my mother an Eastern Star. These organizations were faith based. Faith, Hope, Charity and Love were all positions in the organization. We did service projects but much of the purpose was social. Well, it seems a bit odd now, but it was a place where this new kid in town was welcomed and felt as though she belonged. There were certain expectations that went along with belonging...memorizing the rituals, wearing evening gowns to some of the meetings, and keeping everything very secret. The Rainbow Girls police will probably be paying me a visit this afternoon for telling you some of our secrets. I'm kidding!

Some young adults when they go to college join Sororities and Fraternities in an effort to continue this sense of belonging. This provides a new group of close friends. Some of those friendships last a lifetime.

As adults, we still long for those simpler days and we long for that feeling of belonging.

Some of us remember the Cheers theme song...for those too young to remember, this once very popular sitcom took place in a bar called "Cheers" and it was, according to the song, the place "where everybody knows your name." I heard this week that one of these iconic bars is closing. I'm sure their regulars will be devastated. We all long for that place where everyone knows our name and where we feel we belong.

Well, this morning some of our young people are ready to belong to the church...to become full members of God's family. These young people completed their studies and preparation for confirmation last spring, but due to COVID, we delayed this special ceremony and celebration until today so that more of our church family could be here to celebrate and welcome them.

There is no secret handshake or password involved. No evening gowns required. Everyone is invited to join, but there are certain expectations that belonging involves. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he suggests that we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. Not laying down and dying physically but spiritually changing the way we live. Instead of simply doing what feels good, we seek to do that which is holy and pleasing to God. He says that this is your spiritual act of worship.

You see, worship is more than just coming to church on Sunday. Worship is being aware of God's presence in our lives every day. When we accept Jesus, we are given a new life and we are empowered to live in a new and different way. God sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within us, to guide us, and to be with us always.

Jesus has invited each one of us into his family with God as our Heavenly Father. Anyone can become a son or daughter of God. Faith in Jesus is the only requirement.

Yet, we do not fully experience that sense of belonging until we become part of a church. This is where we develop friendships with other people of faith, it is where we learn what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, where we grow in our faith, where we are able to use our gifts and talents in service in the church and beyond the church walls. In a church this size, everyone may not know your name, but everyone would love to know your name.

It breaks my heart when I hear of someone who joined the church but never really got involved. Never felt as though they belonged. Right now it is difficult when many of our beloved church members are at home worshipping with us via the internet and other beloved members are here in the sanctuary. Yet, friends, we are all still family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We want each one of you to know that you are important. Just because we cannot all see each other face to face, does not mean that we do not still hold a place for you in our hearts. We long for the day when we all will be together again. You belong here.

Many of these young people grew up in the church. They sat here on the steps with Pastor Dave and listened as he and his puppets told them about Jesus. They attended small groups and learned even more. Then they were old enough for youth group.

I'll bet you were excited when you finally became old enough to attend youth group. It was exciting and fun. Yet, it was so much more. It was a place where you could belong. Then it was time for Confirmation Class and you were given instruction about what it means to be a Christian and a member of the church. You were given the opportunity to choose and to determine if you were ready to make this very adult and very serious commitment. And, now, here you are today, ready to accept for yourselves the vows that were made for you when you were baptized as infants or young children.

And, here we are ready with open arms to welcome you.

When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John, a dove descended from heaven and a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." When we are baptized, God says, this is my beloved child, in who I am well pleased. Then when someone who has been baptized is ready to accept the vows that were made for him or her at baptism, we confirm that person in their faith and God is indeed pleased. The scripture from Romans' says that as a result of their faith, they are now made new creatures and given a new life in Christ. They receive incredible blessings and incredible gifts to be used for the building of God's kingdom here on earth.

We do not yet know all the gifts God has given these young people but it will be a joy to watch them grow in their faith and to help them discover the gifts God has given them.

A couple of weeks ago Lynn mentioned to me that there were six of their former youth group students on the platform on that particular Sunday...singing, playing instruments, reading scripture and participating in the service. They had been given gifts and they were using their gifts to lead the church in worship.

We do not yet know what gifts these young people will discover and develop, but we know that they will be a blessing. As members of this family of God, they will be treasured.

This morning as a part of the ceremony of confirmation they will profess their faith and also make a commitment to belong to the church. And, we will make a commitment to support them as they continue on their faith journey. Belonging, being a member, means participating, supporting, and being involved. This is not a requirement to be a Christian but it is an expectation that goes along with belonging to the church. It's how we grow in faith and keep our faith alive.

I believe that it does us all good to be reminded of what it means for us to be children of God and members of the body of Christ. It is good to remember that we belong here. We are family. It is good to be reminded of what we as Christians believe. I want to invite us all to join these young people as together we profess our faith and renew our vows.

As we conclude the singing of "We Believe" our confirmands will come forward and Joel and Lynn will introduce them. The vows will be on the screens and whether you are worshipping with us at home or here in the sanctuary, I invite you to join in.

READ VOWS

LAY HANDS ON EACH CHILD AND SAY:

.....The Lord defend you with his heavenly grace and by his Spirit confirm you in the faith and fellowship of all true disciples of Jesus Christ.