

“Belief and Belonging”
Jeremiah 1:4-10, Luke 13:10-17
by Rev. Don Ludwig

Introduction

It’s the World Cup Final, and a man makes his way to his seat right next to the pitch. He sits down, noticing that the seat next to him is empty. He leans over and asks his neighbor if someone will be sitting there. ‘No,’ says the neighbor. ‘The seat is empty.’ ‘This is incredible,’ said the man. ‘Who in their right mind would have a seat like this for the Final and not use it?’ The neighbor says, ‘Well actually the seat belongs to me. I was supposed to come with my wife, but she passed away. This is the first World Cup Final we haven’t been to together since we got married.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that. That’s terrible....But couldn’t you find someone else, a relative, a friend or even a neighbor to take her seat?’ The man shakes his head. ‘No,’ he says. ‘Unfortunately, they’re all at the funeral.’ // I am guessing that man didn’t sing “You Raise Me Up” to his wife on their 50th anniversary.

Today I want to talk about belief and belonging – how our beliefs about others and ourselves shape our sense of belonging. I know that belief in the context of a religion and certainly christianity has been mostly centered around theological dogma. Do you believe in heaven? Do you believe in the physical resurrection? Or how about the virgin Mary? In our biblical story today, what is allowable on the Sabbath?

Or let me go seminarian on you, are you a 5 point or 3.5 point or 1 point Calvinist? Do you believe in consubstantiation or transubstantiation regarding communion? In seminary, I remember thinking, who the hell cares? I didn’t. I still don’t. And I am pretty darn sure that Jesus didn’t either. That kind of theology bores me. Jesus didn’t give the time of day to it.

Who cares what we believe in terms of theological assertions? What difference does it make? That kind of belief is a product of the church. A product of you and me trying to build walls that make us safe and comfortable but only serve to divide.

Biblical Foundations for Believing in Others

But there is another kind of belief that was important to Jesus. We see it throughout the bible and certainly in our lessons for this morning. It is a belief in the potential of others and in ourselves. In the Old Testament, Jeremiah pleads with God saying, don’t send me, I am just a boy, certainly there is someone else more qualified than me, I am not an eloquent speaker – Jeremiah was giving all of the disclaimers he could think of. But God said to Jeremiah, I believe in you. And Jeremiah became one of the most influential prophets – known as the weeping prophet – because his heart was so tender and full of love for God and the people of Israel.

In the New Testament, Jesus was always believing in people. Just look at the motley crew of disciples he put together – this was certainly not the A team and probably not even the B or C team. Just look at how Jesus defied the religious rules of the day in favor of investing in

people's lives. Healing someone was far more important than keeping the sabbath law. Hospitality has a far greater reward than keeping the house clean for the King's arrival. Believing in others builds a sense of belonging.

The 37 of us that went to Puerto Rico discovered that truth. It is amazing to go into a culture that spends so little time on thinking, rule making and trying to have the right answers and so much time just doing, and being, and believing and belonging. Even though there were differences I am sure, we never discussed theological distinctions. They didn't matter. When we arrived, it was like we were family. Domingo, our driver and Pastor Evelyn hugged us at the airport and welcomed us like we had known them our whole lives. Everywhere we went, people believed in us. We felt like we belonged.

The Focus of Growing Churches

Deborah Bass, church historian and scholar, several years back, pre-pandemic, conducted a three-year study of 50 vibrant and growing mainline churches. She discovered several commonalities. The churches that are growing today are those that take their practice of hospitality seriously and offer a depth of experience and faith. Belief and Belonging. They are churches that are embedded in a ministry that is well defined – one that is focused on believing in the potential of all people. They are churches that realize the importance of belonging not only to individuals but to the whole community.

Church experts demonstrate that people are not attracted to gimmicks these days. They want substance and integrity and purpose. Many years ago, a neighboring church not far from our own, large and so-called evangelical, sent out a postcard inviting people to Easter services. On the front was a picture of their pastor sitting on a Harley Davidson, saying "Come and enjoy the ride with us!" Can you picture Pastor Scott or me on a Harley? Gimmicks don't work.

I Believe in You

More than any other time in all of history, people seek belief and belonging. This is good news for the church and for you and me. We do not have to be pretenders, we can be the people God created us to be. We do not need to always compete with corporate strategies for growth, we can be ourselves. We simply need to enjoy the people around us – to believe in the power of each one of us. Kristan Poirot, a Communications professor of African, Women and Gender Studies, has said, "There is no greater power and support you can give someone than to look them in the eye, and with sincerity/conviction say, "I believe in you."

What do you believe about people? Sometimes, most certainly, our beliefs are wrong. We are limited and we often limit others because of those faulty beliefs.

- Thomas Edison was told by one of his grade school teachers that he was so dumb and dull that he should clean chimneys for a living.
- Ludwig Van Beethoven's professor of music told his parents that a career as a musical composer was out of the question. He was hopeless.

- Helen Keller was told countless times that she could not do things due to her visual impairment!

What if those folk listened to the non-believers? *Garry Kasparov once said, “Women, by their nature, are not exceptional chess players: they are not great fighters.”* I know that those are in fact fighting words at Southminster – and for good reason.

Let’s think about this for a moment. What do you believe about women in general and women as chess players in particular? How many women have not reached their potential due to the ignorance of men? How many people of non-dominant status have not reached their potential because of the ignorance of the dominant class? Despite Kasparov’s faulty belief, Judit Polgár, became the highest-rated female player in history, and was once the youngest grandmaster ever among men or women. These people, thank God, went on to do great things because there was someone else who believed in them when no one else did – someone who brought encouragement and inspiration to their lives. There is power in our beliefs. Beliefs have the power to create a sense of belonging and go on to create unbelievable results.

The way we speak to each other, even the words we use, demonstrate our beliefs. With our language, we can build or tear down, we can love or we can hate, we can confront or we can gossip, we can lie and deceive one another or we can believe. Belief is about reaching outside of ourselves. Taking time to encourage and tell others you appreciate them. I have heard of a church that placed notepaper in the pews each week for the purpose of sharing kind words and writing notes of encouragement to the staff, each other, and those who were not present. That simple act has transformed their community and created a sense of belonging like no other.

Examples of Belief and Belonging

Jacinda Ardern, the prime minister of New Zealand, recently gave us an example of belief and belonging. After the shootings at the mosques in Christchurch where 50 people died at the hands of a white supremacist, she reached out in mourning to the Muslim community, many of whom were migrants or refugees, saying, “We are one. They are us.” Out of respect and as a sign of unity, she wore a head scarf as she joined many others who attended funerals for the victims. Within just a few days she announced that semi-automatic weapons like those used in the attack will be banned. And she convened a high level inquiry into whether the government could have done more to prevent the attack. Belief and Belonging.

In Puerto Rico, we attended the Ascension Lutheran Church for an early evening worship and afterwards were invited to a potluck and dance. Most of our group members recall this experience as one of the most memorable moments of the trip. What made it so memorable? Certainly it was some of the best food we have ever consumed in our lives – I kid you not! But mostly, it was the people who invited us in not as guests but as family. You might expect in a social setting such as a potluck and dance, there would be Puerto Ricans grouped together and us main-land folk group together – sociologically, that is most often how it goes – but no. Everywhere I looked, I saw intermingling. From an outsider, you couldn’t tell the difference between them and us. We were one. Belief and belonging.

Washington County Sacred Organizing Cohort

I want to highlight one way that we might get involved this year in expressing our beliefs and belonging to the larger community of Washington County. The Washington County Sacred Organizing Cohort is a group that is focused primarily on building relationships and community organizing around equity and social justice. You may be aware of the organizations that are connected to this venture:

1. Leaven Community Land and Housing Coalition (LCLHC)
2. Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice (IMiJ)
3. Together Lab

Some of you may be aware that the Cooper Mountain Affordable Housing Project will soon provide residences for 75 low-income families in Washington County. Our own Craig Butler has been a huge part of this venture. This low-income housing project is largely the result of the work of this Washington County collaborative organizing group. There are currently four other churches involved and we are hoping that Southminster has 3-5 individuals willing to participate as part of this year's cohort. They will meet twice a month or so for brainstorming and learning what other churches are doing and providing support to each other. This endeavor is certainly a faith practice of belief and belonging. If you are interested in being a part of this or would like to learn more, I will be available after worship or you can email me. Exciting times.

Belief Raises People Up

What do you believe? Not about theology, who cares? What do you believe about people around you? What do you believe about people you have never met? What do you believe about people who are non-dominant and stigmatized?

I choose to believe that life is not just a battle between good and evil or right and wrong or winners and losers. I choose to believe in individuals. I choose to believe that I am you and you are me – that you raise me up – and I raise you up – and together we are more than we are by ourselves. I believe in you!

A-men.