

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 10:22-30

Acts 9:36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17

May 12, 2019

Fourth Sunday of Easter

There are some weeks I sit at my desk and stare at the scripture for the week, unable to discern what needs to be said. Unsure of the main point or even an interesting point. But I know that you all show up here each week waiting for a bit of wisdom and a dash of humor to help you through the week.

However, this week presented some challenges. The questions I kept coming back to loomed large and daunting. The inconsistencies in our Gospel text from John were simply frustrating. I started to list my grievances on a sheet of paper....

I read John and I wrote...why in the world is Jesus so effusive when the people ask if he is the Messiah? "I have told you and you do not believe." Well, apparently the message didn't get through because the crowd asked him to tell them plainly, to speak directly and clearly. Why can't Jesus just be straight forward? And why in the world would he say that if you don't believe, you don't belong in his community? What's that about? I thought we are to preach about God's abundant love and acceptance and these words just seem divisive and exclusive. Actually, at first glance they seem rather threatening, counterintuitive to who we know Jesus to be.

And, if you are one of the people not sure what to believe when it comes to faith, then this verse might send you over the edge. Why even try to believe? Why care about a community? All valid questions. So let's consider Jesus' words a little further. What's really going on in John?

One of my favorite commentators, Debie Thomas, speculates that maybe the problem in our text isn't that we don't believe. Maybe it's that we feel we don't belong. And when we feel we don't belong it's all too easy to disregard any claim to faith whatsoever. Belief would seem pointless, especially when there are all kinds of contingencies about what belief should and shouldn't look like. And if you are one of the people who keep falling out of bounds (which most of us are), I wouldn't blame you if you said you didn't believe.

For instance, if you struggle with believing in God, did anyone ever tell you that you weren't good enough to come to church because of your unbelief? If so, you probably felt you didn't belong. If you said you had doubts about prayer and if God even hears us, did anyone ever tell you you weren't a good enough Christian because of your doubt? Then, you probably felt you didn't belong.

If you are gay or struggled with your identity, did anyone tell you that being gay is a sin because the Bible says so ...well, then you probably felt you didn't belong. If you are a woman, did

someone ever tell you that the bible says women shouldn't be leaders in church yet you felt called to church leadership, you may have felt you didn't belong. Did anyone ever look at your tattoos or your clothes or your hair and roll their eyes because you didn't look the part of someone who should be in church? Then you certainly didn't feel you belonged. I could keep going. And I am sure you all could add to this list with your own experiences.

And then you get this verse from Jesus that if you don't believe, then you don't belong. And you've got people all around you telling you the same thing...you aren't good enough, you don't act the right way, you don't make the right decisions, you don't look like a Christian or talk like a Christian or behave like a Christian.

And, folks I have to tell you...if those are the message I kept hearing, I wouldn't want to believe either. I wouldn't want to believe in a religion that made people feel worthless or dirty or guilty or small. I wouldn't want to believe in a religion that told me I was unloved and unwanted.

Debie Thomas, however, says that that is not what Jesus was saying. Jesus was pointing out that you can't believe until you feel that you belong. In other words, belonging is essential to believing. Acceptance is essential to saying yes to this thing called Christianity. And love is critical to building the body of Christ.

I had someone tell me the other day how much he appreciated the fact that I often say before communion that our table is open to everyone...wherever you are from, whoever you are...you are welcome here. He said, one day, a young person is going to be sitting in this congregation, feeling that they don't belong because they have been told that God does not love them and when they hear your words of invitation, that they are welcome, that they belong...it can change everything for them.

You have to feel that you belong before you can believe.

Rachel Held Evans, one of the most influential Christian writers of our time (many of you know that she tragically passed away this week at age 37), changed countless lives during her far too short life by her vision of inclusion and belonging. She wrote,

"...the Gospel doesn't need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors and shouting, "Welcome! There's bread and wine. Come eat with us and talk." This isn't a kingdom for the worthy; it's a kingdom for the hungry."

We are indeed hungry to belong.

Maybe Jesus didn't give the quick, plain answer to his disciples that day because belonging isn't based on plain words. It's based on relationship and relationships take time and patience; time to grow alongside one another and patience to allow one another to flourish. Time to break down the walls that have divided us and hurt us. Time to heal and time to trust. That's where

belonging is born. Once we are welcomed with open hearts and open doors, the belief in this thing called faith becomes a bit more tangible.

So here's what I want you all to do...I want you to find a way to welcome someone, find a way to help them feel that they belong. Show the love of God to the broken, to the scared, to the alienated, to the hopeless. Show the love of God to those who doubt, to those who have been hurt. Let them know that there is absolutely nothing that could ever separate them from the love of God. Because real faith is built on belonging and there is no door that should ever be closed in God's house. Amen.