

Isaiah 9: 1-4  
I Corinthians 1: 1-18  
Matthew 4: 12-23

Belonging  
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Last month, there was a flap, a controversy between Fox News and the Daily Show with Jon Stewart - wait, when **isn't** there controversy between those two TV programs? In December, it was focused on a remark by a Fox News talk show host, who said "By the way, for you kids watching at home, Santa... is white." This was in response to an African American blogger who had written about the difficulty of growing up and always seeing a white Santa Claus, wishing that there could be a Christmas symbol that showed less ethnic favoritism. We could probably agree that the Santa who is portrayed and depicted at Christmastime likely bears little resemblance to the 4<sup>th</sup> century Turkish Saint Nicolas. That red suit is so **not** 4<sup>th</sup> century. The skin color and hair – well, who knows. Reindeer probably have not been seen in Turkey since the last Ice Age. But never mind about all that – this was a struggle of ideologies, and you belong to one camp or another. The stronger your feelings of outrage on the subject, the more you **belong** to one group or another.

This belonging thing, this group thing, seems to be built into human nature: it's about survival. We need each other in order to be happy and healthy. But the positive emotions of inclusion in a group often come with some negative expressions. Because I am part of this clique, I am definitely **not** part of that one. We start to define ourselves by "Not that, not that, not like them, etc., etc." How many of you remember children in elementary school bonding over exclusion, either of that one unfortunate outsider, or a whole group of children who were just not worth befriending. The other way people develop a sense of belonging is through allegiance to a particular leader, focusing their identity on loyalty to that person. All of these things bring a deep primeval reward...probably a chemical substance is released in our brains that conveys security and worth.

Religions, of course, function this way too. People are nurtured into belonging, or have conversions into belonging, which build up the community. Which is great, right? But usually, those same negative expressions are at play, when we might hasten to explain that we are **not** like those fundamentalists, we are not like those Catholics, we are not like those Jews. In the UCC, we are often so busy explaining what we are **not** that people begin to wonder what we **are**... except a denomination that is tolerant of diversity. Unless, of course, you happen to be too conservative, or too traditional, or think that Santa is white. **Then**, we close ranks and mutually reinforce our correctness.

This is not new. Back in Jesus' day, belonging was important too. People belonged to factions of Judaism, people belonged to a language group, people belonged to one leader or another. John the Baptist had a following that lasted through his ministry, through his imprisonment, and after his death. Some people felt called to that kind discipleship, and defined themselves by a particular understanding of religious truth and practice.

I sometimes think that the calling of the disciples by Jesus, as it is usually represented and understood, sends us off in the wrong direction. We imagine a scene when some working men drop everything, once and for all, become disciples, learn from Jesus, then become Apostles, qualified

for full-time work in a career as missionaries. It is seen as a seamless process: you are called, and in that moment your life is on a set trajectory. You have repented, once, and you are all set. Your identity and job description are confirmed and sealed. You belong.

But, Jesus' proclamation was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Those first companions of Jesus were called into a lifetime of repentance, *metanoia*, turning around. They were never done with learning, they were discovering their identity, they were a work in progress, just as we are. The dramatic lakeside call was one in a series of calls. Once they followed the call of Jesus, they had to continually examine their identity in the context of the Kingdom of Heaven, which lives in the world, with the many peoples of the world. They needed to continually re-examine and re-define their belonging.

In the early church, crises arose when many different kinds of people began to feel this pull towards the Good News offered by Jesus. These were people who had previously been defined by family, by class, by wealth, by language, by allegiance to the Emperor, or allegiance to a rabbi, or by training in a particular school of thought. Now they had to find common ground. This is the setting for Paul's letters to communities in various cities of the Roman Empire, a generation after Jesus. The motley crew that was the church at Corinth, a faith community gathered by Paul, is sorting itself out. It's a work in progress, the church in Corinth – and that's a nice way of putting it.

The one common experience shared by all these people was baptism. This sign of repentance, of *metanoia*, of turning around, marked them as new people. For Paul, the waters of baptism washed away old distinctions, the old "belongings," as he wrote in other passages. In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul speaks of the Corinthians -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- having been baptized into one body and drinking one Spirit. Old forms of identity, old ways of understanding oneself and one's neighbor were replaced by membership in one body of Christ and sharing in the one Spirit. Galatians 3:27-29 Paul says that a baptized person "puts on Christ," (like a garment) in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, and in whom there is not male and female, "for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Again, baptism means an end to old structures of self-definition.

But, fallible humans as we are, those Corinthians, as soon as they dried off from baptism, found other markers for superiority, other ways to define sub-groups of specialness. They started talking as though it mattered who had performed the baptism, as though there was "magic" in the hands of the one pouring the water. They claimed that they "belonged" to their baptizer, rather than belonging to Christ. To Paul, writing from a distance, this must have seemed like a return to the dark old days of faith as an exercise in superiority. It must have been very discouraging to watch a beloved community disintegrate.

And so he uses all his powers of persuasion to let them know that they already belong, that it was their calling as Christians to be "belongers" par excellence. This was as much about mission as identity. A harmonious and diverse community of love was an example to outsiders of a new kind of life. The disciples of Jesus had been called into a circle where they might continually repent and turn towards God and one another, and thus become healing and light for the world. The Corinthian church was called to work through their squabbles so that true wisdom could shine out – the wisdom that, paradoxically, is most clearly displayed, not in human superiority, but in the weakness of the cross.

Let's fast-forward 2000 years. How are these lessons learned and lived out in this place and time? What would it mean for us to "be united in the same mind and the same purpose." I would like to think that the church is uniquely equipped to discover what "unity" really means - in spite of the multitude of examples history gives us of sectarian strife. We would need to move beyond all the comfortable identity markers of race, age, economic circumstances, age, gender, and political persuasion that gives most groups their sense of security and purpose. This would be true repentance, a calling that takes a lifetime to realize, spiritual formation that requires a power beyond human wisdom, a belonging whose bonds are forged in the Kingdom of Heaven.

But what a beacon this could be for a weary world: a transparent example of the energy of inclusion. What a contrast to the usual social and political discourse of our nation. To my mind, the challenge would be to unite this sense of radical inclusion in our local community with a shared mission of justice and peace in the wider world. It would take conversation, it would take time, it would take people of faith, who trust in the foolishness that led Jesus to call those fishermen from mending their nets to mending the world.

The Shaker communities in eighteenth and nineteenth century America wrote many songs about their religious aspirations, about wisdom and unity. We still sing some of them today, though we might not understand them in quite the way they were written. One of these songs speaks to the constant need for us to repent, to keeping turning around. The Shakers felt that the Kingdom of Heaven truly had come near, as Jesus preached, and they responded with these words:

*When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed.  
To turn, turn, will be our delight, 'til by turning, turning we come 'round right.*

I might paraphrase and say, "When true diversity is gained, to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed. To turn, turn, will become our song, 'til by turning, turning we start to belong."