

“Where Do You Belong?”

1Peter 2:9-10

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I read the story of a woman who explained that her favorite spot at the local zoo was the “House of Night. She says;

“One very bright day, I stepped into the exhibit and was plunged into total darkness. Almost immediately, a small hand grabbed mine.”

“And who do you belong to?” she asked.

A little boy’s voice spoke in the darkness: “I’m yours till the lights come on.”¹”

I imagine that the little boy was scared being alone in complete darkness. He instinctively grabbed a lady’s hand to find his own security and he wouldn’t let go of her hand. He claims that “I’m yours till the lights come on. I’ll belong to you til then”. This morning, I want you to think about your spiritual security.

Who do you belong to?

In the long waiting, I became a United States citizen last Monday. It has taken almost a year for me to have my citizenship interview. Honestly, I have had mixed feelings when I decided to change my nationality. Most of you are not even seriously aware of your national identity because you were born in the U.S. But I chose to belong here and became a U.S. citizen. Now I feel mixed blessings in this transition. On the one hand, I gave up my loyalty to South Korea and on the other hand, I found my new country and a place where I and my family will belong. Before I had my citizenship interview, I asked myself a question, “Why do I want to be U.S. citizen?” I believe that it is the same question like “***where do I really belong?***” A word lingered in my mind on and on and it became clearer as time went on. The word was “belonging” and I felt I belong here! For the citizenship interview, I had to study and answer random questions about U.S. history and government topics. One of the questions was this: What is one reason colonists came to America? There are many possible answers such as freedom, political liberty, religious freedom, economic opportunity, practice their religion or escape persecution. But there was common sense that colonists desperately longed for. It was the desire for their own belonging! Independence day is the celebration of our new belonging as independent Americans. Now I join as one of them!

¹ <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/who-do-you-belong-to-adoption-jeff-strite-sermon-on-adoption-136962> Accessed June 28, 2017

Our Scripture reading today is closely related to our spiritual sense of belonging. The Apostle Peter wrote a letter to a Christian community in Asia – Minor now known as Turkey for the purpose of encouraging their faith and spiritual identity. He reminded them of who they are in relationship with God. Let me share the brief background of this letter. When this letter was written around 60 A.D. before the death of Nero's Roman Empire, most Christians were seriously persecuted and oppressed by not only the Roman Empire but also discriminated and isolated by the majority Jewish community.

In first A.D. the population of Asia was a mixture of cultural, social and racial groups but the area was generally prosperous. The numbers of Christians were steadily increasing and churches were growing, but they had to face many difficulties inside and outside. From outside, the Roman Empire persecuted Christian churches as criminal groups calling them mobs who incited riots and slanders. From inside, Christians were mixed with religious and racial backgrounds (Jews and Gentiles). Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians were also isolated and discriminated by the Jews. Jewish Christians had to deal with disconnection from their own community because of their new faith. Simply speaking, Christians had a hard time to survive because they couldn't find their own community. They were discouraged, felt abandoned and treated as worthless. The Apostle Peter taught Asia-Minor Christian fellows to remind them of their new spiritual identity, "Christian-followers of Christ" and encouraged them to remember the meaning of baptism in view of God's perspective. The Apostle Peter told Christians that they were neither Romans nor Jews but "We are chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. Once you are not a people, but now you are the people of God."

Peter wrote a letter to Asia- Minor Christian community to find their new identity and sense of belonging trusting in Jesus Christ. He emphasized that Jesus Christ is their cornerstone. He reminded them that Jesus was rejected by men, but chosen by God and precious to Him. He continued to say that we are God's chosen people, a royal priesthood and a people belonging to God. Imagine how powerful these words were to those who experienced being outcast, discriminated and disconnected from the society because of their faith in Christ. Peter acknowledged these people's wounded hearts and lifted them up as God's special people and noblest group. Even though they had been treated as the lowest level in this society, they were regarded as the highest level in God's eyes. Often we do not realize that God created us for his purpose. Christians' spiritual identity and belonging is not a nationality either as it South Korean or the United States, but we are citizens of Heaven. God has chosen us to be God's children.

Do you remember John Wesley's Covenant prayer? In history, The Covenant prayer was used for the renewal of the Methodist believers every year since when the first covenant service was held on Monday 11 August 1755, at the French church at Spitafields in London, with 1800 people present. The prayer begins with an expression, "I am no longer mine but thine...and it ends with this: "And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen." In this prayer, what caught my eyes is "Thou are mine, and I am Thine." Our blessed God cannot be separated from us, because Christians believe in God, and God is in us and we are his. We engage ourselves to this world with mission but we belong to Jesus Christ and our true name comes from God and our spiritual citizenship is in heaven.

I read an article about Rev. Adam Hamilton, the lead pastor of the Church of the Resurrection Kansas City. He is one of the most influential pastors in our denomination and he serves his church with 20,000 members. A recent study found that Methodism is one of the most American's politically divided denominations, with both congregants and their pastors roughly split between the Democratic and Republican Parties. Human sexuality also divided them. Pastor Adam estimates that his congregants are perhaps 60 percent Republicans, and 40 percent Democrats—slightly more liberal than their communities. He encourages his congregation to look at the news every day and think how Gospels call us to respond to these social challenges beyond political disagreement.² Pastor Adam dealt with the struggles of Kansas city's public schools for church's ministry and now they give half a million dollar in every year to six areas of elementary schools, supporting a variety of tutoring and enrichment programs. He navigates his congregants to be involved in evangelical and social gospel together regularly. He shares his insight:

Among his disciples, [Jesus] chose Matthew the tax collector, who was a collaborator with the Romans, and he chose Simon the Zealot, who was absolutely opposed to the Roman occupation... In essence, he took a hardcore Democrat and a hardcore Republican, and asked them both to be his disciples.³

Pastor Adam Hamilton strives to position himself above partisanship or political ideology. Rather he tries to stay non-partisan like Switzerland as neutral as possible and found ways to bridge partisan divides to engage with its community.

² https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/06/how-one-pastor-is-bridging-the-partisan-divide/531822/?utm_source=fbb Accessed June 28 2017

³ Ibid.

Jesus called disciples to join his social and spiritual movement. His vision and dream was to build God's Kingdom among us. But his ministry wasn't to establish a social system or political ideology. He proclaimed God's love for all people, strived for reconciling ministry for the broken and the lost and found followers who would work for God's kingdom. Where does your spirituality belong? Fair Oaks United Methodist Church was built here on this hill and has been carrying our mission providing a place where we can find God's love, responding to the divine call to engage ourselves to bridge divisions and work with our community, practicing our ministries. This is where we belong! Amen.