

Reflections on the Priority of Belonging

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There is an African proverb, “To be is to belong” or “To be human is to be in family.”¹ This perspective contrasts to a world in which the focus is on thinking or doing rather than belonging: “I think, therefore I am” or “to be human is to be a co-creator with God.” A yellow sign board on Interstate 90 coming into Chicago shouts out in large letters: “I do therefore I am.” In North America, to be is to think and do. Western theology sometimes reflects these two perspectives by distinguishing between the search for truth (faith as doctrinal truth) and the search for love and speaks of the tension between the two.²

It seems self-evident that being human necessarily includes belonging and also includes thinking and doing. In this essay I reflect on the priority of belonging. This reflection began for me when I was teaching in Nigeria from 1957 to 1966. It was immediately apparent that within African culture belonging and family had a priority I had not encountered before. Individual interests were again and again subordinated to the well-being of the family and the community. Families made decisions about who should receive an education and for what vocation people should prepare in order to benefit the whole community. Students often came to seminary because their church and community had decided that was to be their vocation. Within the tribe, clan, or family, persons had corporate re-

sponsibilities that took priority over personal desires.

There were times when it appeared to me as an outsider that individual gifts and dreams were needlessly sacrificed. Nevertheless, I was always deeply impressed by the solidarity within communities and by the reality that echoed the early church, in which the early Christians had all things in common (Acts 4:32–35).

A recent personal family experience made belonging even more real to me. In 1998 our daughter Sheree gave birth to a beautiful little girl, Mary Rose. Shortly after her birth it became evident that she had been born, in one doctor’s words, “with a horrible disease.” Tests indicated that she had some form of mitochondrial malfunction. Her beautiful body’s cells were not able to adequately process nutrients into energy to enable her mind and body to develop. In order to be near a facility with qualified medical staff, we purchased a

1. See Judah Kiwovele, “An African Perspective on the Priesthood of All Believers,” in *Theology and the Black Experience: The Lutheran Heritage Interpreted by African & African-American Theologians*, ed. Albert Pero and Ambrose Moyo (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 56ff.

2. Langdon Gilkey, *Through the Tempest: Theological Voyage in a Pluralistic Culture*, selected and ed. Jeff B. Pool (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 22.

duplex in Milwaukee, and our daughter and family lived on the first floor while my wife Mary Lou and I lived upstairs. Government grants made it possible for nurses to be with Mary Rose for portions of the day. Sheree, who worked as a nurse, slept with Mary Rose by her side nightly for three years. Mary Lou and sometimes I cared for her during the day and night. Mary Rose never developed beyond a baby and at times was tormented by seizures. However, in our caring for Rosie it became amazingly clear that she belonged. She was held, loved, bathed, suckled, talked and sung to, laughed and wept with. She was born into and died in her mother's embrace. Mary Rose was valued, loved, and affirmed as she was.

Her baptism signified that not only did she have a human family where she belonged, she also belonged to God. As a child of God she belonged to the human family that through her genetic structure reached back into antiquity and also belonged to God's future, where all tears will be wiped away in a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21–22).

It became evident in loving and holding Mary Rose that belonging preceded thinking and doing; love and care affirmed that belonging preceded her awakening individuality and her capacity to think creatively. Rosie appeared never to have thought rationally, although she knew how to nestle down on my shoulder and go to sleep. Without thought and creativity she transformed our lives. She brought family together; she raised within our lives a sense of belonging; she enabled us to love more deeply, and the holes in our lives after two years of her absence testify to her continuing presence in us. Mary Rose helped me to capture a deeper sense of belonging. "To be or to be human is first to belong."

It is possible to account for belonging

on the basis that we all participate in an intricate web of creation. One of the insightful and profound facets of Buddhism is that reality is dynamic—a dynamic totality of experiences and events that are in constant flux and flow. Within that cosmic pulsing reality, configurations of events and experiences emerge into an experience of self in the midst of other selves. Truth is the awakening to the fleeting temporality of the self and insights into the mystery that "I" am simply an aspect of the cosmic dance.³

Belonging is fundamentally a cosmic fact. Mary Rose belonged to a dancing cosmic flow that emerged in a genetic code for the human family. She was born into that reality. Because of some unknown quirk or mutation in the cosmic dance her genetic code did not enable her cells to make a full life possible.

A variety of philosophical, theological, and religious expressions focus on the fundamental cosmic unity of reality, affirming belongingness within the web of life. Hinduism, Sufism within Islam, forms of mysticism, and theological formulations related to idealism or process thought articulate that reality. Transcending the subject/object dichotomy places all selves including Mary Rose in Paul Tillich's ocean of "the Ground of Being."

The biblical tradition, however, does not focus on metaphysical or cosmic webs of existence to speak of belonging. Rather, communal and personal human values—images—create and affirm belongedness.

The Old Testament prophets as well as the Torah focus on belonging to community. The Torah intends to affirm and

3. For a good description of Buddhist understanding of reality see Wolpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grover, 1974), 51ff.

enhance human family and community in the presence of God. Dishonoring parents, taking life or seizing property, committing adultery, bearing false witness, and coveting all violate the value of every human life. Everyone belongs; everyone has value. No member of the community may violate another member. To be human is to be a participant in a caring community.

This absolute assertion of the value of every member of the family is reinforced by the prophets.

When you fast, you make yourselves suffer, you bow your heads low like a blade of grass and spread out sackcloth and ashes to lie on. Is that what you call fasting? Do you think I will be pleased with that? The kind of fasting I want is this: Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice and let the oppressed go free. [Everyone belongs, and everyone counts.] Share your food with the hungry and open your doors to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives. [Everyone belongs; everyone counts.] Then my favor will shine on you like the morning sun. (Isaiah 58:5ff.)

Numerous New Testament images echo the belonging and counting of everyone. The Jerusalem temple had a series of courts around the Most Holy Sanctuary. The outer court was designated for the Gentiles; the next court, a little closer to the Holy of Holies, was for the Jewish women; then the men; then the Levites and priests; and finally the place for the High Priest, who once a year entered the most holy realm and sprinkled blood on the Ark of the Covenant. The early Jesus movement testified that the gigantic drape that enclosed this inner sanctum of God's presence was torn from top to bottom when Jesus died—a proclamation that everyone belonged within the presence of God. God was loose in the world, and the inner sanctum was open to even women and the nations.

The story of Jesus' own ministry is the

story of the one who lived for others, every other. Lepers and unclean women were touched by Jesus and healed; the possessed were addressed and freed to sit at the messianic banquet table; Gentiles were listened to and their daughters healed; a city bent on the death of a Galilean prophet was wept over because it belonged within the broken heart of Jesus and Jesus' Abba; Roman soldiers driving spikes into Jesus' hands and feet were forgiven in spite of themselves. Everyone was embraced and loved, everyone belonged. Love that was willing to walk with a wounded heart bore the sins of those who rejected, despised, or crushed that love. All were embraced and belonged to the Abba and Spirit of Jesus and the universe.

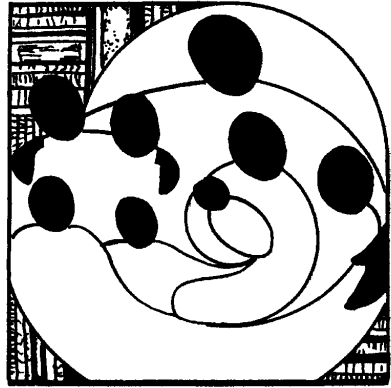
True belonging derives from human community created by human capacities for caring, for love, for affirmation, for life. Faith trusts that this capacity, this potential and power for love and caring, emerges from, is created and empowered by, and is grounded in God, "the beating heart of the universe." This love embraces the totality of reality. The Christian faith has seen, touched, and felt that caring power concretized in Jesus and trusts that that love incarnate in Jesus is the love that is active in shaping all reality. Caring love that bubbles forth from the depths of reality is the love that affirms and embraces the whole of creation and the whole of humanity. Ultimately, in the depths of the mystery of the universe is that power that makes everyone belong, everyone count. It is the mystery enfleshed in Jesus as love of every person, which embraces our Mary Rose and all the tragic brokenness of the human story.

This affirmation of the priority of belonging leads to two of the most radical theological formulations within the Christian tradition, namely, the call to love the

enemy and the justification of the sinner. It is noteworthy that the members of the Jesus Seminar, whose historical skepticism is remarkable, almost unanimously agreed that the words “Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you” are from Jesus. The criterion of dissimilarity, something foreign to both the world in which Jesus was born and to the world in which the Jesus movement moved, signified that these words are the words of Jesus.

What makes these words so radical? That they announce that everyone belongs! Human community is divided in innumerable ways: male and female, Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, white and black, Palestinians and Israelis. However, the primary divide is between those who are friends or fellow citizens and those who are despised and hated—enemies who in turn despise you and desire your suffering and death. Love of enemy transcends the gaping divide between those who belong and those hated ones who never will. Love of enemy profoundly asserts that absolutely everyone belongs, everyone is loved and cared about.

The gospel grounds this love that transcends the friend/enemy chasm, the love of God made flesh in Jesus. We encounter chasm-bridging care in Jesus when he weeps over the city that will crucify him, when he hangs in the darkness and the terror of death and says “Father, forgive them.” After being raised he encountered the disciples who had denied and betrayed him with the haunting words “Peace; as the Father sent me so I send you.” Jesus in Matthew finds chasm-bridging love within the very heart of creation. For verification of loving the enemy Jesus did not point to the law or the prophets but to the sun and rain, which gracefully pour down on both the just and the unjust (Mt 5:45). Jesus pointed to the creator who loved with perfection.



Love of enemy is the message of the miraculous book of Jonah. Called to preach to the eighth-century B.C.E. Assyrian terrorists, Jonah took flight to the west, beyond the arm of Assyria or God. Was he frightened by terrorists? No. He was terrorized by the grace of God! This becomes the climax of the Book of Jonah when, trapped in the jaws of death, the prophet reconsiders his calling and goes to preach in Nineveh. As he had suspected, the Ninevites turn to God, and God graciously forgives them. God’s forgiveness becomes a reality despite Jonah’s protests of the stupidity of grace for the enemy! The divine voice replies, “Are there not 120,000 people in Nineveh who do not know their left hand from the right?” and Jonah, “are there not precious animals there?” Over the prophet’s protests of a disgusting grace, the Book of Jonah preaches “Everyone counts; everyone belongs.” The human family is incomplete if anyone is left out or cut out.

In the words of Professor Duane Priebe, “If you draw a line between those who are ‘in’ and those who are ‘out,’ Jesus is always on the other side of the line.” In the world of contemporary global politics, that also holds true with regard to the “axis of evil.”

In God's world and God's family everyone belongs.

Justification by faith also speaks powerfully to the priority of belonging. In Galatians and elsewhere Paul understands the gospel as that power which creates a new community where everyone belongs. "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God, through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:26–28).

Everyone belongs, everyone counts. The letter of Paul to the Ephesians sees this bridging of the chasm between Jew and Gentile as the mystery which was not made known to humankind in former generations (Eph 3:5). Now it is revealed to the holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Jesus Christ (3:5–6).

Theology often emphasizes that justification by faith means that our relationship with God is sheer gift. Paul saw the law to be the factor which separated Jews from Gentiles. It created a yawning chasm, separating the human community from one another and the sinner from God. For Paul, God in Christ overcame the power of the Law which condemned the sinner, whether Jew or Greek, and offered both Jew and Greek justification, or right standing with God. Salvation was to be received by Jew and Greek through faith/trust in Jesus Christ. All persons now belonged to Christ and belonged to God. The mystery is revealed that everyone now belongs to the same Christ, the same God, and the same family.

Lutherans are fond of saying that justification by faith is that reality upon which the church stands or falls. This is our unique way of stating that belonging takes

priority over thinking and doing.

Two black theologians writing in the volume *Theology and the Black Experience* claim this for their people and the whole human family. Richard Perry writes: "Accepting, through faith, God's gift of grace means we are equal to and with all of God's other children" (p. 18). Justification by grace means that everyone counts, everyone belongs. Simon S. Maimela, Lutheran South African theologian, writes:

The theological name for this unconditional acceptance of the unacceptable (unlovable) sinner by God in Christ is what Luther referred to as "justification by faith alone." God's unconditional acceptance of us is the sole basis for Christian ethics and mutual acceptance. And it is the basis on which all South Africans, especially those who call themselves Christians, can begin to work toward overcoming the division that threatens to destroy us all (p. 40).

Unconditional acceptance, justification by faith alone, speaks to our peace with God and speaks powerfully of our unity in Christ, where everyone belongs, everyone is accepted, everyone is loved, everyone is affirmed, everyone is reconciled, and everyone is an instrument of reconciliation. In Christ the priority is on belonging and being instruments of belonging, ambassadors of Christ for the reconciliation of the world (2 Cor 5:18–20).

"I think, therefore I am" and "I do, therefore I am" are formulations that distort the reality of human well-being. "I belong, therefore I am" and "I am loved, therefore I am" recognize that my genetic heritage, my physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being are all gifts of the nurturing care of the human family, to whom we all belong, and to God, who is the origin of life and who insists on being Immanuel, God with all of us. *I belong, therefore I am enabled to think and do.* Place that on the yellow sign on Interstate 90!



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