

# Belonging: Being a Community of Resurrection

1 John 3:1-3  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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Decades ago, someone gave me one of those daily calendars with cartoons based around church life. On one, which is the only one I remember, there were people sitting around a table drinking coffee. It looked like a committee meeting of some kind. And one person explains to the others, "This month, it's sharing and caring."

The humor, of course, is that next month they'd move on and focus on something else. Perhaps you've had a pet project, or a particular emphasis on something which, for a period of time, drew a good deal of your focused attention. Well, after attending the national antiracism White Privilege Conference, held right here in Tulsa just last week, I'm laser focused like those women in the church parlor. And the topic, among dozens presented in a plethora of workshops and keynote speeches, is **belonging**. Yet, instead of holding my (and I hope our) attention for just one month, I would like it to remain a **top priority** for us here in this community of faith forever.

It is said that **one of the primary reasons why many people still attend church, or choose to join one in this day and age, is for a personal sense of belonging**. In this morning's Adult Church School class, we watched a 15-minute video (the link, of which, is in the all-church email I sent out on Friday, of which I highly encourage you to watch), entitled, "**Belonging, A Critical Piece of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion**". That's often abbreviated as **DEI**, whose associated programs and policies, especially being implemented in schools and in the corporate world, are now being attacked, with attempts to be banned, by certain state and national politicians who don't want this country to move into a position of accepting diversity, equity, and inclusion for all. But that's another sermon.

But why should we care about belonging? Because, as you heard in the Epistle reading from 1 John, "**See what love God has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.**" And from a progressive Christianity approach, **ALL people are children of God, therefore all belong!** The speaker on the video we watched this morning is **Carin Taylor**. She begins with two important questions, of which I now want to ask of each of you.

The first, "**Has anyone out there ever felt like they didn't belong?**" After noticing that almost everybody raised their hand, as I suspect would be the case here, she asks, "**Has anyone out there ever made someone else feel like they didn't belong?**" I suspect at one time or another we all may have to raise our hand on that one, as well.

In the video, she goes on to explain the **5 Tenets of Belonging** necessary for anyone to thrive, whether it be at a workplace, school, and yes, church. Perhaps, even the home. They are the need for:

1. psychological safety
2. empathy
3. acceptance
4. connection
5. embraced

While at that conference last week, one of the workshops I chose to attend was called, **"Bedrock of Belonging: Forming the Foundations for Transformation in our Communities."** It was led by **Rebecca Flores Harper**. Not surprisingly, a majority of people studying and leading this DEI work are women, and a good many women of color. Ms. Harper started by asking, and having us write down: **What does belonging mean to you? What does it feel like? What does it look like? What does it sound like? Who is there?** One of the resources she referenced is from the TIES Center, whose work revolves around helping students, especially those with significant cognitive disabilities, find a sense of belonging in their classrooms and throughout their schools. Again, it was not a difficult leap to **transfer and translate the same information to a church setting, one like ours**. Their overall instructional material is entitled, **"Creating Communities of Belonging."** To provide a visual of their overall work in this area they developed a **circular graphic, called "Dimensions of Belonging"**. I have put a copy in your worship bulletin as an insert, and we will look at it shortly.

In preparing and summarizing all this in a document that I sent out this week to the elders currently on our Session, which we will focus on and discuss in meetings throughout the remainder of this year, I replaced the words dealing with a school setting with a church setting. With those changes, here's their introduction.

Everyone wants to be valued and have a sense of belonging in their community. The need for valued belonging is true for [members and visitors, children and adults] in a [church] community as well. Although belonging is equally important for all [people], [those who seem "different"] are less likely to experience a deep sense of belonging.

Developed to directly address the creation of [church] communities in which each and every [person] is included in all aspects of [church] life, *Creating Communities of Belonging*...describes ten dimensions of belonging.

In the most positive way I can think of putting this, College Hill has attracted many who might self-identify as being "different". How many of us, for instance, would feel like we would not truly belong to a community of faith that preached biblical literalism and inerrancy? Or, one with a profoundly orthodox approach to theology? Or, those who are not welcoming of anyone that doesn't fit their understanding and categorization of "normal", like with sexual orientation, gender identity, physical appearance or ability, mental health, socio-economic status, or whatever? So with this consideration, I proudly declare that I am indeed different. Perhaps you would declare it, as well.

**When looking at this wheel, with its ten dimensions of belonging, we are first asked to reflect upon what we are doing well. Then, what could be done better or differently in each of these areas. Finally, what action steps could be put into place to enhance a deeper sense of belonging for all here at College Hill.** I want to very briefly mention something about each facet.

The first is **Present**. Belonging begins with your presence. When we are present together, we are more likely to get to know one another, accept one another, feel comfortable around one another, and build relationships with one another. This is sometimes called the **"proximity effect."** How has being in proximity to each other here been part of helping your relationships form? Might there be any barriers to presence, whether physical or attitudinal?

Second is **Invited**. To be invited is to have your presence or participation sought out by another person. Yes, we send out lots and lots of reminders of activities to which you can participate, but there's something special when someone else personally invites you to

attend. How does it make you feel to be invited to something by someone else? **Is there anything that might make you hesitant to invite someone to an activity, or to be on a ministry team? If so, what is it and why?**

Third is **Welcomed**. While churches should be thoroughly welcoming places, many are not. To be welcomed is to be received by others with warmth, friendliness, and even delight, like with a big genuine smile. What makes you feel welcomed? How does this impact your sense of belonging? **Is there anyone, specifically or generically, that you would struggle to welcome?**

Fourth is **Known**. To be known, especially by name (wear your nametag), is to be seen as a unique individual and appreciated for who you are. And remember, we are also all children of God. Reflect upon how it felt to enter a new place for the first time. What helped you move closer into relationship with others? **Might we possibly misjudge others before we get to truly know them?**

Fifth is **Accepted**. Folks come to College Hill from many different backgrounds. To be accepted is to be embraced gladly without condition and viewed as an equal. Knowing you are accepted contributes to feelings of self-worth, and helps you to get grounded. **What did it feel like when there was a time you were not accepted, intentionally left out for who you are?** What steps can we take to promote greater understanding, embracing diversity in all its many forms?

Sixth is **Involved**. A great majority of the things we do as a community of faith are meant to be done together, not as solitary events. To be involved is to be actively engaged with and alongside each other, including intergenerationally, in shared worship, learning in Christian Education classes, fellowship, and events like yesterday's Work Day. **How involved are you, am I, in these opportunities?**

Seventh is **Supported**. Reaching one's full potential and ability to thrive involves getting the support and resources we need. You are most likely to feel supported when you are part of a community in which you are known personally, where people see your potential, and where you are provided any assistance you might need. **When have you felt supported here? When have you not? How can we do more to help support each other?**

Eighth is **Heard**. Everyone wants to feel heard and understood. To be heard means that your perspective is sought, listen to, and respected. **Think back to a time when you felt misunderstood, ignored, or overlooked in an area that was important to you.** How did this experience impact your sense of belonging? What steps can we take together to help everyone feel heard, especially those who may have a harder time sharing their perspectives?

Ninth is **Befriended**. There is nothing quite like a friendship. To be befriended means having relationships with others marked by what the apostle Paul calls mutual affection. Whether healthy or not, my closest friends here in Tulsa are part of this community of faith. **How has being befriended impacted your sense of belonging here?**

And tenth is **Needed**. To be needed involves being valued by others and considered an indispensable member of the community. Again, the apostle Paul relates how each and every one of us is gifted in different ways, and it takes all of us, with those varied gifts, to work together to be the body of Christ. **And there is to be no hierarchy of gifts, just different ones, all of which are needed. Each and every one of YOU are needed.**

Our welcome here at College Hill is intended to be inclusively open. Therefore, **we must extend grace and forgiveness to one another for those times we have made someone else feel like they don't belong. I know I need that grace and forgiveness.**

To belong, we need not think alike or believe alike. Yet, as children of God, we are called to love alike. So, this month, this year, this decade and beyond, it's all about belonging – for we are ALL children of God.

Amen.

## DIMENSIONS OF BELONGING

(Adapted for church setting, from TIES Belonging Resources - [tiescenter.org](http://tiescenter.org))

Belonging is easy to affirm but much harder to define. What does it really look like for all people – members and visitors, children and adults - to *belong* within an inclusive congregation? What are the experiences and relationships that will assure everyone that they have a cherished place within their community of faith? Churches that are committed to the concept of belonging must have a strong understanding of the practices and postures that contribute to this goal.

