

The Gifts of Relationships: Belonging

Luke 4:21-30, 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-gifts-of-relationships-belonging/

I.

Being a sports fan isn't always easy. Kansas City Chiefs fans are in a golden era, but long-time fans remember the seasons of heartbreak and defeat. True fandom requires devotion and loyalty, even when the scoreboard isn't in your favor.

But loyalty can be fickle. We celebrate our team's victories—but when things go south, some start looking for a new team to cheer for.

Consider a 2015 football semi-final game in Swaziland (now Eswatini) in southern Africa. The Mbabane (uhm buh **baa** nay) Swallows, wearing blue jerseys, were facing the South African Kaizer Chiefs. The Chiefs assumed they had devoted fans beyond their borders—until the Swallows won in a dramatic 4-2 penalty shootout.

As the Swallows erupted in celebration, television cameras panned the crowd. Some fans cheered. Others were crushed. And then—one young fan, caught on camera, peeled off his Chiefs jersey. Underneath? A Swallows jersey.

In real-time, he switched teams. One second, he was all in. The next, he was cheering for the winners.¹

We laugh because we recognize ourselves in it. We like to think of ourselves as loyal, but too often, our commitments—whether to people, causes, or even faith—are conditional.

And this is what we see in today's Gospel passage.

II.

At the beginning of Luke 4, Jesus returns home to Nazareth, stepping into the synagogue where He was raised. These people knew Him. He was Joseph's son, the neighborhood carpenter. He had likely built their doors and fixed their tools.

And they had heard the rumors—stories of His miracles and teachings up in

Capernaum. I'm sure the synagogue was packed with people curious about what Joseph's boy had to say. Probably a few were wearing their "Jesus is my homeboy" t-shirts in support, wondering what Jesus would do for them.

Jesus stands to read from the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus then sits down and gives the shortest sermon ever. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (v. 21)

Amazement filled the room. They whisper, "Isn't that Joseph's son?" He was well-spoken. And the promise he read. What gracious words for us, God's people!

Perhaps they have doubts. Could Joseph's son be the anointed one they've been waiting so long for? Or maybe they feel a sense of pride. If he's the Messiah, that must mean good things for us. He's one of us. We belong.

Does Jesus hear their skepticism? Does he sense their pride? Whatever the case, what Jesus says next changes everything. As quickly as that soccer fan switched jerseys, the crowd's wonder turned to rage.

III.

It happened after His next words: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.' And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown." (v.23-24)

He reads the room. Jesus knows what they're thinking. 'Surely, He'll take care of His own first. Surely, we get the blessings before anyone else.'

Jesus reminds them of Elijah and Elisha, beloved Jewish prophets who performed miracles but not for Israel. They helped outsiders, foreigners, and even the enemy.

God had always worked in the strangest places among outsiders to the established faith community. And that was still the plan, according to Jesus.

They've probably already heard about his healing of the Roman centurion's servant up in Capernaum. Rome was the enemy. A Roman military man, the worst of the worst, except for maybe a traitorous Jew who worked for Rome against his own people. Someone like Matthew, the tax collector who became one of the twelve disciples.

But Jesus healed the servant because of the centurion's deep faith, even though he didn't belong. He was a Gentile, a non-Jew. He was the enemy.

The crowd in Nazareth lived as if they had exclusive rights to God's favor, even though their Scriptures taught otherwise. But then Joseph's son returned home and reminded them that this had never been true. God's love and grace aren't just for them but for everyone—even the outsiders, the foreigners, and their enemies.

Their response? Rage. They try to drive Jesus out of town. They try to silence him by taking him to the cliff with the intent to throw him over.

The anger of the crowd in Nazareth wasn't just about Jesus' words—it was about what those words meant. If God's love truly extended beyond them, it challenged everything they believed about who was in and who was out. And when deeply held assumptions are threatened, people often react with resistance, even violence.

Theologian Fred Craddock wrote, "That these two stories [of Elijah and Elisah] were in their own Scriptures and quite familiar perhaps accounts in part for the intensity of their hostility. Anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition which they have long defended and embraced."ⁱⁱ

But what if, instead of resisting, we leaned in?

Daryl Davis did just that in an unexpected way.

IV.

Daryl Davis was performing music in a bar in the 1980s when a white man approached him, amazed that a Black man could play the blues so well. During their conversation, the man admitted he was a member of the KKK, a man who had built his sense of belonging around the exclusion of others. But instead of

walking away or fighting back, Daryl leaned in. Without anger and with genuine curiosity, Daryl asked the man how he could hate him if he didn't even know him.

This encounter sparked a lifelong mission for Davis. He started meeting and talking with Klan members, not to argue or attack them, but to understand why they held their beliefs. In an interview, Davis said, "When two enemies are talking, they're not fighting. It's when the talking ceases that the ground becomes fertile for violence. If you spend five minutes with your worst enemy — it doesn't have to be about race, it could be about anything...you will find that you both have something in common. As you build upon those commonalities, you're forming a relationship, and as you build about that relationship, you're forming a friendship. That's what would happen. I didn't convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves."ⁱⁱⁱ

Over time, through genuine friendships, many Klansmen—including high-ranking leaders—began to question their hatred. More than 200 KKK members ended up leaving the organization, handing their robes over to Davis as a symbol of their change of heart. Davis collects the robes and keeps them in his home as a reminder of the dent he has made in racism by simply sitting down and having dinner with people.

Daryl refused to let cultural, racial, or ideological lines dictate who was in and who was out. Former Klansmen didn't leave the Klan because Daryl argued them into it—they left because they encountered a different way of being.

Jesus' hometown crowd expected that their belonging meant others were excluded. Daryl showed that true belonging is expansive—it makes room, even for enemies.

V.

Derek Black's transformation was no less dramatic. Raised the son of a prominent white supremacist, Derek had never questioned the lines drawn around them and the views against other races. But then, one day, as a college student, Derek was invited to a Shabbat dinner hosted by people Derek's ideology had labeled as "the inferior other."

The people at that table had every reason to reject Derek. They had seen Derek's words, knew the history, and understood the damage Derek had done. But instead of pushing Derek away, they pulled up a chair. The host, Matthew, decided his best chance to affect Derek's thinking was not to ignore or confront Derek but to include them. Matthew remembered thinking, "Maybe he'd never spent time with a Jewish person before." They allowed relationships to do what an argument never could. Over time, through genuine encounters and belonging, Derek's worldview unraveled.

In reflecting on that invitation, Derek said, "It's completely unfair and remarkable to me that those who were discriminated against ... their response was to reach out and invite me to dinner."

In 2013, Derek publicly disavowed white nationalism and has since become an advocate against the movement he once championed.

VI.

Derek's story is a powerful reminder of what happens when people choose grace over exclusion. It echoes a struggle as old as faith itself—the tension between keeping the circle tight and daring to widen it.

In many ways, this is the same struggle that played out in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. Just as the people of Nazareth wrestled with the idea that God's love extended beyond their community, we, too, face the temptation to define belonging in ways that feel safe and familiar. We draw lines, build barriers, and convince ourselves that we are the ones on the inside.

But the gospel doesn't work that way. Instead of reinforcing walls, it tears them down. Instead of keeping grace exclusive, it flings the doors wide open.

Dr. George Mason, in his sermon "Faithful Betrayal," reminds us that the good news of God cannot be contained or controlled: "The good news of God that Jesus announces is extravagant grace. It can never be limited or controlled by insiders. It

can't be ours if it's not all of ours. It's for everyone or no one. The real test of whether we get it is if we are willing for everybody to get it."

This is precisely why Jesus' message in Nazareth was so radical. It wasn't just about announcing God's favor but redefining who that favor was for. It's for you, AND it's for the outsider. The foreigner. The poor. The overlooked. The captive. The enemy. The ones you never expected to be included.

And that is still the call today.

VII.

So, what will we do with this gift of belonging? Will we cling to a version that is small, safe, and exclusive? Or will we dare to embrace the radical, boundary-breaking belonging of Jesus—the kind that reaches across lines, pulls up chairs, and redefines who's in?

The Spirit of the Lord is upon **us**—not just to receive good news, but to proclaim it. Not just to belong but to invite. Not just to stand in comfort but to step into challenge.

This week, look for someone on the margins. You won't have to look far, my friends. Someone who feels unseen, uninvited, unwelcome. Someone you struggle to understand or agree with. And instead of walking past, **walk toward**. Instead of reinforcing the walls, **fling the doors wide open**. Instead of waiting for them to find their place, **offer them a seat at your table**.

The gift of belonging isn't just for us; it's for everyone. And it's only when we share it that we truly receive it.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvu8RifYeN4>

ⁱⁱ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 63.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convinced-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-robos>