

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**March 17, 2019, The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent**

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 15:11-24

**SPACE FOR GOD WEEK 2: I BELONG**

**A Sermon Series Based on Donald Postema's *Space for God***

A father and his son, travelling together in a wagon, came to the edge of a forest. Some bushes, thick with berries, caught the child's eye. "Father," he asked, "may we stop a while so that I may pick some berries?"

The father was anxious to finish his journey, but he did not have it in his heart to refuse the boy's request. The wagon was called to a halt, and the son alighted to pick the berries. After a while the father wanted to continue on his way. But the son had become so engrossed in berry-picking that he could not bring himself to leave the forest. "Son!" cried the father, "we cannot stay here all day! We must continue on our journey!"

Even the father's pleas were not enough to lure the boy away. What could the father do? Surely he loved his son no less for acting so childishly. He could not think of leaving him behind—but he really did have to get on with his journey.

Finally he called out, "You may pick your berries for a while longer, but be sure you are still able to find me, for I shall start moving slowly down the road. As you work, call out 'Father! Father!' every few minutes and I shall answer you. As long as you can hear my voice, know that I am still nearby. But as soon as you can no longer hear my answer, know that you are lost, and run with all your strength to find me!"

*(Your Word is Fire, The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer, edited and translated by Arthur green and Barry W. Holtz. Quoted by Donald Postema in Space for God, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, p. 49)*

We belong to God who longs for us to hear God's voice.

We belong to the God who made a covenant with Abraham and all of his descendants in the faith, including us.

The God who showed Abraham the stars in the night sky and said "I am your God," says to each of us gathered here this morning: "you are mine."

We belong to God. The God who came to us in Jesus and told us the story of a son who ran far away from home, only to realize that he needed to go home again, even if he was treated like another laborer on his father's land. And when that son returned home his father ran to greet him and swept him up in his arms of love.

We belong to God. The God who wants us to hear that God's arms are always open to welcome us home, no matter how far away from God we've strayed.

The God we belong to, comes to us this morning inviting us to take this message all the way into our hearts,

We are loved,  
We are chosen,  
God's love does not end  
We belong to God.

We started the Lenten season last week with Donald Postema's *Space for God*. We were invited to consider making space for God in our lives during Lent and beyond.

This week Postema gives us what he calls "the basis for the Christian life...the belief in and experience of belonging to God." (Study, p. 17) "This sense of belonging is the beginning of any understanding and experience of spirituality and prayer. (Postema, p. 38)

We belong to God.

Postema begins with this short story: "I was speaking at a religious service in a nursing home. I wanted to present something comforting to the aging patients. So I began by saying, "You belong." I was about to continue when a ...women sitting near me in a wheelchair startled me by shouting in her high wheezy voice with both distress and longing. 'TO WHOM?'"

"Who do I belong to?" is a question that comes to us in times of loneliness and loss. It comes to us in times of transition and change and fear. Feelings of loneliness are a basic part of being a human being. For some they come often, for others they show up in the middle of the night, for others these feelings of loneliness are a daily struggle. All of us, at one time or another, have asked this question; it's a human question. To whom do I belong?

Postema invites us to take the path of not filling up our loneliness with other people and things and events and busyness. He asks us to stay with the loneliness and become "aware of life at a deeper level."

Even when it feels like we don't belong to anyone "God's gentle voice reassures us: "You do belong—to me."

Postema says: "The parable of the prodigal son tells us, 'there is a homecoming for us all because there is a home!'" (Thieleke)

Belonging means we have an address, a place where we are "at home."

We belong to God and God will not let us go as others might.

That belonging, he writes, is more lasting, more constant, more loving than any belonging that job, school, club, church, friends, or even family can provide. As Psalm 100:3 says: "God made us, we belong to God." (Space, p. 37)

He also reminds us of God's words to us in Isaiah 49:15-16: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?

Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you, (says the Lord),

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands."

We belong to God. We are tattooed on God's hands. We belong to God. We are known and cherished by name.

Like the father who left his son picking berries, like a mother nursing her child, God's love is meant for us daily, moment by moment, breath by breath.

I read a story this week about a Catholic priest, Father Bill, who left his ministry for several months at the end of his dad's life. He went to stay with his dad to do the primary care for him in his dad's last months of battling cancer.

At the end of each day he would help his father into bed and then read him to sleep as his father used to do for him. Bill was exhausted from a day of caregiving, and looking forward to falling into his own bed as soon as his father fell asleep.

But as he read to his dad, he would look up to see his dad staring at him.

He would plead with his father: "Look, here's the idea. I read to you, you fall asleep." "Bill's father would impishly apologize and dutifully close his eyes. But this wouldn't last long. Soon enough, Bill's father would pop one eye open and smile at his son. Bill would catch him and whine, "Now, come on."

The father would, again, oblige, until he couldn't anymore, and the other eye would open to catch a glimpse of his son. This went on and on, and after his father's death, Bill knew that this evening ritual was really a story of a father who just couldn't take his eyes off his kid."

The person telling this story says God is even more like this with each one of us. God can't keep God's eyes of love off of us. He quotes author Anthony De Mello: "Behold the One beholding you, and smiling."

He continues: "What's true for Jesus (at his baptism and transfiguration) is true for us, and so this voice breaks through the clouds and comes straight at us: "You are my Beloved, in whom I am wonderfully pleased." (Boyle, *Tattoos*, p. 19-20)

We are loved,  
We are chosen,  
God's love does not end  
We belong to God.

The person telling this story about his friend is a new author I was introduced to while I was out in Oregon at the pastor's conference. His name is Gregory Boyle. He a Catholic Priest out in Los Angeles who has worked with gangs there since 1988. He helped create and founded Homeboy Industries the largest gang intervention, rehab, and reentry program in the world. I highly recommend his two books: *Tattoos on the Heart* and *Barking to the Choir*. You will meet deep sadness and deep healing and the unceasing grace of God in those pages.

Father Gregory Boyle, whom the homies and home girls as he calls them, call him G or G-Dog. He tells the story of Cesar, whom he had known since Cesar was a small child. In 1987 there were earthquakes in Los Angeles, and many people in the projects slept out in tent cities because it was safer. Father Gregory walked through the tent city for those two weeks and he remembers Cesar saying to him: "Are we gonna be okay? Is this the end of the world?"

Cesar joined a local gang as he got older and spent more time behind bars in jails and prisons, than time on the outside. When Cesar was 25, he called Fr. Boyle because he had just gotten out of four years in the state prison. He was staying with friends away from the projects and the gangs. But he had no clothes. His girlfriend had burned them all while he was in prison.

Father Boyle agrees to take him shopping for clothes and says that when he pulled up to the apartment to pick him up, Cesar is waiting for him. He writes: "I guess you might say that Cesar is a scary-looking guy. Its not just the fact that he's large and especially, fresh out of prison, newly "swole" from lifting weights. He exudes menace. So there he is, standing and waiting for me. When he sees it's me, this huge ex-con does this bouncing up and down, yippy-skippy, happy-to see-ya, hand clapping gleeful jig."

He flies into my car and throws his arms around me. 'When I saw you right now, G, I got aaaalllllll happy!'"

Boyle writes: "There was some essence to him that hadn't changed from that child wanting to know that the world was safe from earthquakes."

They go to J.C. Penney and Boyle tells him he can spend \$200 on clothes, because he needs everything. He quickly finds what he needs and now they are standing in a really long check-out line, the white-haired priest and the menacing ex-con. And everyone is really quiet and staring at Cesar.

Boyle writes: “Not only is he menacing, but he seems to have lost his volume knob.” People can’t help but hear what he is saying, but they are pretending they can’t hear.

“Hey,” he says in his outside voice, “See that couple over there with the baby boy?” I walked up to them and I looked at the guy and I said “Hey, don’t I know you?” And his girlfriend grabbed the baby and shook her head and said: “NO, WE DON’T KNOW YOU!” She was panicking, he looked like he was going to have a heart attack and he says: “NO, WE DON’T KNOW YOU!” And then I looked at him closer, and said: “Oh, my bad, I thought you were someone else.” Then they relaxed when I said that.”

Then he turns to Father Boyle and says: “I mean, G...do I look that scary?”

Father Boyle shakes he head no, and says, “Yeah, pretty much, dog.”

And now everyone who has listened to all of this, starts to laugh along with them, they can’t help it.

Father Boyle drives him back to his friend’s apartment and Cesar gets quiet and frightened as they get closer: “I just don’t want to go back to prison,” he says, “I’m scared.”

Boyle tells him: “Look, son, who’s got a better heart than you? And God is at the center of that great, big ol’ heart. Hang on to that, dog—cuz you have what the world wants. So what can go wrong?”

At 3:00 o’clock in the morning the phone rings and it’s Cesar. Boyle writes:

“Cesar is sober and it’s urgent that he talk to me.

‘I gotta ask you a question. You know how I’ve always seen you as my father—ever since I was a little kid? Well, I hafta ask you a question.’

Now Cesar pauses, and the gravity of it all makes his voice waver and crumble, ‘Have I...been..your son?’

“Oh, hell yeah,” I say.

“Whew,” Cesar exhales, “I thought so.”

Now his voice becomes enmeshed in a cadence of gentle sobbing. ‘Then...I will be...your son. And you...will be my father. And nothing will separate us, right?’

That’s right,” Boyle answers.

Boyle continues: “In this early morning call Cesar did not discover that he has a father. He discovered that he is a son worth having. The voice broke through the clouds of his terror and the crippling mess of his own history, and he felt himself beloved. God, wonderfully pleased in him, is where God wanted Cesar to reside.”

(Boyle, Tattoos, p. 28-31)

God, wonderfully pleased with each of you, is where God wants you to reside.  
You are a son worth having, you are a daughter worth having.

You are loved,  
You are chosen,  
God’s love does not end  
You belong to God.

In the words of Anthony DeMello: “Behold the One beholding you, and smiling.”

We conclude today with Postema’s homework assignment for us as we make “space for God.” We will practice it now and then you are invited to try this at home for 5 minutes each day. We will practice this for one minute.

During that minute you are invited to focus on the promise: "I belong to God." We will enter into a time of silence and during the next minute slowly repeat over and over again to yourself the good news: "I belong to God."

Then at home try working your way up to 5 minutes a day, if possible, in the morning, repeating out loud or quietly to yourself: "I belong to God."

Let us now enter into a minute of silence with this promise repeating in our hearts and heads: "I belong to God."

Boyle, Gregory, *Tattoos on the Heart, The Power of Boundless Compassion*, New York: Free Press, 2010, p.

Postema, Donald, *Space for God, The Study and Practice of Prayer and Spirituality, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 1983, 1997, p. 33-50

Postema, Donald, *Space for God, Leader's Guide, The Study and Practice of Prayer and Spirituality, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1983, p. 17-19.