

## Finding Our Way to Belonging

As we move into this time of reflection, we recognize the gift it is to be freely gathered for worship on the live stream and in this space – on land loved by First Nations and others before us and where we now have the opportunity to build ways of community.

I invite you to join your heart with mine in a word of prayer. God, you call us into community – with your Spirit, with ourselves, with one another, and with others whom we do not yet know. We pray this morning that you help us to see more clearly our paths to belonging. We pray as followers of Jesus, the risen one. Let the people say together, Amen: Amen!

Belonging. Where and with whom do we belong? Given a moment to consider, we might each be able to name least several groups of people (spaces of community) where we would say, ‘yes, I belong there.’ I wonder, where and when has there been a home in which you felt you very much belonged? When you hear that word, “home,” are the physical space, people and animals that first come to mind present-day or from a time much earlier in your life?

Belonging is to be in a close relationship marked by familiarity and connection. In spaces of belonging, we prioritize knowing and being known by others. Ideally, a household (that space where we rest, work, play, encourage one another, and work through conflicts) is a place where we can be our full selves and love others in their fullness.

I invite us to close our eyes for a moment to wonder about this: **Where else do you seek and find belonging (that is – a space of closeness, familiarity and connection)?** As we open our eyes, let’s listen to one another name aloud a few spaces of belonging.

What has surfaced? *[In a space of resonance with an author or a writer, a beautiful space up north at the cabin, my glorious back yard.]* Spaces of belonging – of connection, familiarity, closeness.

In recent days, I found myself in conversation with someone with whom I feel a true and deep sense of belonging. Having worked on a project together that day, we recalled a challenging moment when we felt stuck and frustrated because we had encountered a difficult roadblock. One of us admitted that we had considered giving up, which opened the door for the other to describe a similar feeling. We shared a collective groan (maybe even a giggle) in recognition of how the work had been more difficult than either of us anticipated. We were able to smile together with pride in how we eventually accomplished the task and were able to benefit from the results. That extended moment of dwelling in a space of close connection felt like belonging for me. It felt like knowing and being known.

Let's turn to our readings for this morning, inviting them to illuminate some steps we can take toward recognizing and developing our experiences of belonging.

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer's poem "Belonging" invites us to honor both the individual and the collective. Her words offer a response to the perennial question, *"If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?"* Scientists would share that, yes, the crash will emit sound. Philosophical questions remain about the impact of sounds heard and unheard by humans and other beings.

Wahtola Trommer writes about the impact we have within a highly interactive Earth community: *"Alone as we are,"* she writes, *"our small voices weave into the one big conversation. Our actions are essential to the one infinite story of what it is to be alive."*

I hear her reminding us that, while the impact each of us has is discreet and specific, our actions ripple and blend with the actions of others in ways we can't anticipate and often won't ever fully know.

In spaces of belonging, we can practice holding our sense open to how our own actions affect other individuals and the overarching journey of a given community. As I move into the middle years of my life, I have grown to value the moments in my relationships where honest apologies are offered – where I or the other recognizes that our words, actions or inactions have caused hurt. When a relationship is healthy and mature, then honest humility is often met with straightforward grace. These moments of sacred discomfort are among the most powerful for developing the closeness, the familiarity, the connection that define belonging together.

Wahtola Trommer also emphasizes how, while we exist truly and fully in our solitude, we can do more together than alone. *"Just as thirty-five trillion red blood cells join in one body to become one blood,"* she writes. *"Just as one hundred thirty-six thousand notes make up one symphony."* When we join together like blood cells, when our various ways of being harmonize like discreet instruments in a symphony, we can belong together – our collective experiences of strength and beauty can lead us to deeper familiarity, connection, and appreciation for one another.

In our gospel reading for today Jesus encourages us to stay open to abiding in community with him. He invites us to imagine how we can continue to be influenced by him and – by extension – with those with whom we maintain connection. *"In a little while, the world will no longer see me, but you will see me;"* Jesus said, *"because I live, you also will live..."*

*They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”* Jesus’ disciples felt a bond of loyalty to Jesus. They would keep their sense open to his continued saving presence as their rabbi and mentor – their role model above all role models.

This passage has helped me consider how mentorship sometime occurs in unexpected spaces of community. Mentors are those who model strong character, skill, and discipline while helping another to learn how to follow their example. Perhaps a parent, a classroom teacher, or a direct supervisor have been our greatest mentors. Sometimes our greatest, most unexpected role models show up through other relationships. I invite us to close our eyes again for a moment and wonder with me: **Who has been a mentor for you – modeling character, skill, and discipline while helping you to learn how to follow their example?** As we open our eyes again, I wonder: who might be looking to each of us as a mentor in their life? Mentorship is one way of practicing disciplined development of the closeness, familiarity, and connection that lead to a sense of belonging.

As we approach Memorial Day, we will hopefully find moments to pause in a spirit of gratitude for the sacrifices made by all Veterans of our armed forces and (most especially) the ultimate sacrifice made by those who have died in the line of duty. Having not served in uniform, I wonder about the many ways that service people develop a sense of belonging while serving side by side. I imagine that trust within their relationships is crucial to their thriving and, in some moments, to their survival. I hope that those in power create opportunities for our service people to develop genuine closeness, familiarity and connection with one another as they engage in difficult work together and (importantly) as the reintegrate into civilian community as well.

Finally, we turn to the passage from the book called the Acts of the Apostles to notice how Paul and his companions as well as Lydia and her companions model paths toward deeper belonging. They all moved outside the well-worn grooves of our comfort zones.

Paul and his companions followed a clear vision that sent them on adventures to meet far-away people and places. We heard, *“When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross.”* What was this crossing? The crossing was from the space that we now think of as the western edge of Asia into the space we now think of as the eastern edge of Europe. They were open to new experiences of expanding community.

And then Lydia – pushed back against societal expectations, as we heard, going *“outside the gate by the river”* to worship God within the context of a tradition not her own. As a dealer in purple cloth, Lydia was a woman of significant means. Demographically at that time, she was most likely a widow. She had the comfortable option to follow her cultural norms to honor the various gods of her Greek culture. But she sought something more, something else – some other space of belonging with God and people. So she went out to the margins. She went *“outside the gate by the river.”*

May we, too, step out of our comfort zones to develop closeness, familiarity, and connections. Our vibrancy is depending on a sense of belonging. Love is counting on us to belong. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll  
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)  
May 25, 2025 | Memorial Day Sunday  
“Belonging,” John 14:19-27, Acts 16:9-15