

Rise Up and Be Glad: You Belong!

A sermon based on Acts 13:44-52

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

You belong. Two words so many people long to hear or to feel in their life...that sense of belonging. Wasn't that most of high school for you? For me, it was...trying to find where I fit in. I was watching this cooking competition the other day, and the contestants were all teens who readily admit while they often felt like rejects (for lack of a better term) in school, in day to day life...in the kitchen, they feel at home. They belong.

It's certainly not all that uncommon these days, wouldn't you agree? Newscasts, talk shows, even sitcoms portray situations where people (and not just kids) are going through this life, looking for acceptance, wanting to be happy in life and feel like they belong. Ever been you? Like in the children's message, last one picked for kickball. Couldn't sit at the cool kid's table. Always sat alone on the bus.

Which is weird, since society these days is all about acceptance and making people feel loved, right? I'd like to think we're getting better at it. Unfortunately, I sense the pendulum is swinging to the other extreme, going overboard with this whole tolerance issue, going beyond morality. Maybe you see it, too.

Have you ever heard of Adam4d.com? It's run by a guy who puts out these comics which touch on sensitive, moral issues of today and give a practical and mostly biblical view on them. Well, I wanted to share one with you I saw a couple weeks ago. Take a few moments, I'll shut off the lights so you can read it.

What do you think? Isn't that true? Isn't that the world we live in today? It's not surprising, especially if you think about all the recent debates and controversies surrounding an increasing acceptance and approval of gender neutral bathrooms. And that's only the tip of the iceberg. Tell me you're a man in a woman's body, a transgender, a homosexual, a cat, and you're applauded...celebrated as being so brave and inspirational. Tell me you're a Christian, and, to put it bluntly, you're judged...maybe even discriminated. You don't belong. Do you ever feel that way?

You don't belong. That's the message the Jews in our verses from Acts were sending this morning to the Gentile believers. Our section of Scripture follows right on the heels of last week's sermon, where Paul and Barnabas were in Pisidian Antioch, proclaiming the simple yet ever-encouraging message of salvation to the people there, both Jews and Gentiles. The people loved hearing the good news of sins forgiven through Jesus. They wanted Paul to speak again the following week.

So he did. The next Sabbath, it was probably standing room only in that synagogue. Everyone was there to hear Paul...well, mostly everyone. We're told of some Jews there who were filled with jealousy and started speaking out against Paul.

Do you know why? I'm certain some of it was in part to the deep-seeded hatred between the Jews and the Gentiles, which had been boiling for hundreds of years. But most of it had to do with Paul's message. Some Jews believed Paul was wrong to say no one could be justified (that is, be made right with God) by obeying the Law of Moses (which is what Jews for generations had hung their hats on), but

instead salvation could come only by Christ. Meaning, salvation was not just for the Jews. They did not have the distinctive title of God's chosen people anymore. No, "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth," Paul quoted from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus lived, died, and rose for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike.

And see the Gentiles' reaction. They were glad. They believed. They honored the word of the Lord. They knew...they belonged.

What about you? Well, you don't belong...or at least, you don't deserve to. You don't deserve to belong in God's family of believers, and it's not because you're a Gentile (right, you don't have Jewish blood, do you, and if you do, I apologize). It's because you're a sinner.

And it's not even that God has this elitist attitude (as the Jews often did, referring to themselves as 'the children of Abraham'), that he only wants the best and the brightest and the most popular. He's been consistent since way back in the Garden of Eden, when he carefully crafted man out of the dust of the earth and then delicately modeled woman from man's rib. We know. God created humans...he made you and me to be saints, not sinners. He intended for us to be holy and perfect and flawless, just like he is.

And that's who he wants in heaven with him...sinless, holy, perfect saints. Is that you? We don't have to think too hard about that one. Do you lie? Do you gossip? Do you get angry? Do you refuse to forgive? Do you covet? Do I need to keep going?

Imagine you were on the stage, like in the comic. How would you identify yourself? Lewd? Hateful? Greedy? Lazy? Unloving? Never content? Do I need to keep going? You know who'd be in the audience, applauding your life? Satan...his minions. Because that's where you and I belong. The place where screw-ups – sinners – belong...in Satan's prison of hell...a place of perpetual grief and eternal sadness.

You don't belong...there...not anymore.

She was desperate. Her daughter was suffering...was miserable. She had no other choice. Even though she didn't belong there, as he walked by, she mustered up all her courage and cried out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me (and my daughter)!"

Do you remember this account from Scripture? It was a Canaanite woman, whose daughter was possessed by a demon, begging Jesus to grant healing...and she wouldn't stop until he answered her. Do you remember his answer? "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel...It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." In other words, I'm not here for you, Gentile, "dog." I was sent for the children of Israel.

It was a faith test, of course, one she passed with her response: "But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She wanted to belong, even if it meant being the footstool for the Jews' feet...even if all she was given were the scraps of Jesus' love and blessing. To her, that was enough.

Friends, even as Gentiles, we don't have to wish for just a spot under the table in God's house, where hopefully we can fight over whatever scraps of God's grace fall to the ground, even though, just like with the Canaanite woman, that would be enough to make us happy.

We have something better. We have seats of honor at the head table as children of God. We belong. Listen again to Paul's words, "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

He was quoting Isaiah 49:6, where really the context of that verse gives even more meaning to Paul's quote here. There, Isaiah wrote, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept," and then "I will make you a light..."

The Servant is Jesus, sent by God first and foremost for the Jews. It was an important part of Jesus' work to restore and rescue God's remnant among the Jewish people. But he couldn't, he wouldn't be limited to so "small" a service. He came for all people. He came to be a light, even to the Gentiles...you and me. He came to bring salvation to the ends of the earth...to you and me.

In other words, you belong. You belong among God's chosen people because Jesus lived, died, and rose for the entire world, including you. You belong in God's heavenly family because Jesus brought salvation to you and took away your impurities, your flaws, your sins, so now, you're holy and blameless and perfect...saints in God's eyes. Through Jesus, we are exactly the kind of people God wants with him in heaven. Because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we are the people who will be with God in heaven.

And that makes us so glad. We belong! And you know how you know you belong there? You don't belong here.

Take a look at our verses. Paul and Barnabas, their message was true, but it wasn't popular. It didn't take too long for the higher ups in Pisidian Antioch to stir up some persecution and kick Paul and Barnabas out. They didn't "belong" there. And this wasn't the only time that would happen to them. But you notice they left, and they were filled with joy. Persecution filled them with joy because two things happened: 1) they got to share and stand up for the gospel, and 2) filled with the Holy Spirit, they were assured they belonged...to Christ.

Think about that comic. You're a Christian, you're a follower of Jesus, so you don't belong. You don't fit in here...in the world, and maybe that's a good thing. Suffering here, even if it's just verbal abuse and passive persecution, it's part of picking up our crosses and following Jesus, just as he promised we would have to do. The suffering here, it keeps our focus and desire heavenward, where we do belong.

But brothers and sisters in Christ, it's not just about us belonging, is it? Salvation has come to the ends of the earth, and so there are people to the ends of the earth, including in our own backyards, whom God wants to belong to him.

How can you, how will you help? Whether you're aware of it or not, you're already doing it. When Becky and I first arrived here almost 5 years ago, people told us this wasn't a very friendly or welcoming place. I never saw that. From the moment we stepped foot into this church, we saw and met people who were genuinely interested in us, who were glad to have us, who really cared about us. And I'm certain many of you have had that same experience as well.

You're already doing it. You're making this a friendly place where people feel like they belong, which, believe me, in a WELS church, is not always easy to do. The typical knock on our churches is we're

exclusive, closed off, clique-y, judgmental, and there are certainly some people and churches playing right into that view.

But that's not who we really are. We are children of God who have a love for souls and have an amazing and inclusive message of an even greater love of a Savior who died for all so all could belong with him. And, even if we're not always super excited to share that good news (an area we can all always be working to improve), we can show it to the people who walk through those doors, thirsting for the gospel or maybe even just thirsting to find someplace where they can belong.

You're already doing it here. How can you do it better (because I believe we should never be satisfied with anything less than perfection)? First off, be glad. You belong. With Jesus, nothing can take that away from you. And then, be open. Be open and involved in exploring new ways we can help others belong here, too! After all, when we do that, when we think about others and what things we can do to make them feel like this is a place where they can belong, it's really taking to heart the "new" command Jesus gave to his disciples in our gospel today... to love one another as he has loved us.

Now, it's easier to be filled with jealousy and anger when it comes to this area, thinking, "Why are they always changing everything on me...don't they care about what I want?" It's so easy to think about me first and what I want and what I like. It's also so sinful. But that's why you belong here. That's why others belong here. This is a place where sinful people like you and me and others out there (from all walks of life) can come to hear the wonderful message of our sinless Savior who has saved us and made us his own.

So, again, what can you...we do to help others feel like they belong here? Now, I'm not advocating/talking about wholesale changes here (and some things, like the truth of God's Word, just can't ever be changed). But what can we do to be a light to the Gentiles, or, those who are outside of this church? Or, as Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians, being all things to all people so that by all possible means we might save some?

That's why it's good to ponder the three questions when we talk about a change here...NOT "How's this change going to affect me?" but rather "Is the proposed change Scriptural? Is the change intended to build up and expand the kingdom? How can I make it happen?" Friends, having that kind of mindset opens us up to truly show our concern for others and our desire to help them find a place where they belong here...so that here, they can continue to hear the true message of the Light of their salvation.

It's not just a basic need most humans have today...the longing to belong. God wants it too. He wants it for you. That's why he sent Jesus, so through his life, death, and resurrection, you belong to him and belong with him for eternity. We're glad of that. And now, we can and will rise up and joyfully work (sharing the gospel, inviting people here, being friendly to people here, loving people) so that they too can belong...here, maybe, but most importantly, in heaven with us. Amen.