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The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Corinthians 9

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It was 7 am on Christmas morning when Katie, Addie and I were at Logan in the outrageously long TSA line. I wasn't able to get the WiFi/cell service to work so to pull up Katie's boarding pass, so, risking sending Addie and me ahead, Katie left with a bag for the Delta counter. These little things, as many of you know, are sizable challenges when you have a 2-year-old. Okay, so Katie went off with my bag, and Addie's bag; I am carrying Katie's bag, my backpack, Addie, and the stroller. We made it through security okay – Addie and I did – and we did manage to reunite as a family in line to board, but the second Katie saw me she asked about her bag. Oh shoot, I was already carrying so much, I forgot it. Thereupon commenced a lively marital exchange about the pros and cons of retrieving the bag and making or missing the flight (“Leave it here.” “Here? At the airport?” “Wait if you miss the flight, I'm supposed to just go to Asheville and have Christmas with your family?” are a couple of soundbites). Katie ran back to grab her bag, and made it back as the last passenger to board. It's hard to travel in an airport as a parent of a toddler. You have to carry so much. This little seasonal challenge highlights one of the hardest things we as humans have to discern: what is mine to carry? What is someone else's? When do I know I'm carrying too much? What if I forget something?

As we turn to Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians, we instantly reckon with this odd human being who insists on carrying as little as possible through life. Paul is determined to travel light. Right out of the gates of this morning's epistle reading, Paul says, I forego my rights as a minister of the gospel. I don't want to receive money, I don't want to receive status, I have set down my need for claiming my own personal rights. My reward is the propagation of the good news.

We moderns struggle to trust Paul. Some claim he was a misogynist, and others that he was pro-slavery. And just about everyone thinks he's a little off his rocker at times. What he goes on to say is about as neurotic, even narcissistic as it comes, right? He says, “I have become all things to all people.” Paul plays a Jew before the Jews, as one under the law to those who are under the law, outside the law to those outside the law, and to weak, Paul became weak. Paul feels here like a shape-shifting chameleon, like a neurotic people pleaser who just wants to fit in wherever he goes. We know about these neuroses.

When I was last in Birmingham, my little sister and I went out

on a run for ice cream, and so it goes, some of the best, deepest, most real conversation happens over ice cream. I asked my sister: “What do you most fear someone saying to you? Like what’s the word or comment that you are internally fortified against?” My sister answered, and because she has access to this sermon, I will not share her response. She turned the question on me. And without even thinking about it, I said, “I’m afraid people will say to me, ‘You don’t belong here’.” I know what it means to be a people pleaser. I know what it means to try and keep the peace. What can I say, I’m a middle child.

I doubt I’m the only person who hears this voice at the bottom of the well. We live in a culture so set on individual liberties and rights, good things in and of themselves. In many ways, that’s what America is: an experiment in the logic and limits of individual rights. But as it goes, in a culture built on freedom and rights, the unavoidable symptom is a confusion about what it means to belong. We are a culture that is desperate to be noticed, and terrified of being seen. Of truly belonging. To a community. To another person. To a God. Belonging is risky, and it might eclipse my freedom. And if there is one thing we as Americans cannot lose its our freedom. How closely related, I wonder, is the search for freedom and the fear of belonging?

I think Paul knew this judgmental voice – this voice that says, “You don’t belong here.” The apostle Paul was a radical and unflinching human being. A zealot for the law. An arch defender of Temple Judaism. But as it so often goes, our deepest fears become our loudest public cries, and before he became Paul, Saul said to these Jewish converts – “you don’t belong here.” Enacting his fear and his shame, he would kill people to make that point. But Jesus interrupted his madness at some point around the year 30AD. Paul was capsized by the Messiah on the road to Damascus, and Jesus said something shocking, “Those people you are killing, they belong to me.” You can feel Paul trembling in this encounter. And then Jesus goes on, “And you belong to me, too, Paul.”

Paul spent the rest of his life talking about forgiveness, reconciliation, and resurrection; really, he was trying to figure out what it means to belong to Jesus, the One whose presence was large enough, generous enough to include the likes of him. When Paul talks about the gospel, this is the experience he is speaking of. That moment when your harsh and constricted judgement

has been overthrown by a judgement far more expansive, far kinder than you could ever conceive. The voice of belonging.

Paul is not a people pleaser. Trust me. Paul is a-okay talking about his sins, his shortcomings, his thorns in the flesh. But Paul is a prisoner of belonging. And Paul says, I'll do anything for the sake of this Crucified Messiah who told me that despite my evil and my sin, that I belonged. "I have nothing to boast of," he says, "beyond that."

Theologian and preacher Charles Campbell says the best way to describe Paul is probably using the old motif of the trickster. When you read the Canterbury Tales or Don Quixote or any other quest novel, Paul is the one out on the road. He doesn't belong to the inn from whence the journey started, nor is he a citizen of the destination. He's this liminal figure. One who inhabits both the new time of resurrection and the old time of sin and death. He accompanies fellow travelers. Belonging to nowhere, he belongs to everyone.

Now, we said Paul is not a people-pleaser, and yet we also said that Paul is out to win people. "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel." Oh, so Paul must be an evangelist. Out on the hot, dusty, backcountry roads trying to save whoever is weak enough to accept the cure. Paul is an uncanny guy, but one who, I'm guessing up to this point, we've been intrigued by. But here, Paul is the Jewish Billy Graham. Out to save. Out to win souls for the gospel. Paul, you can't be serious!

Paul is dead serious. But remember what he's dead serious about. He's dead serious about this word of belonging breaking more and more into the world. He's serious about the possibilities and prospects of wounded sinners to be transformed. He's serious about God's saving power being real and true for anyone. Paul thinks following Jesus makes a pivotal difference, not just for himself, but for everyone. The word for the difference Jesus makes is called "gospel".

What is the Gospel? This was asked in Men's Bible Study the other week and I think it was David who said, "The gospel is that God loves you." Amen! The gospel is simple: the Gospel is that God loves you. The gospel is that in Jesus the Infinite has become Proximate, and the distance traveled is undertaken for the sake of love, a slightly headier way of saying God loves you. We know what the gospel is; what's difficult is figuring out what it means

for us on a given day, in a given moment, so weighed down and distracted we are.

So, imagine this morning that we are carrying two separate but tangled desires within us on this journey of life. The desire to be free. And the desire to belong. Feel the transcendence of the first. The intimacy of the second. The open road of the first. The warm fire of the second. Freedom is youth; belonging is maturity. Freedom is cleverness and wit; belonging is wisdom. Freedom is the sky; *belonging is the roots*.

But also feel how freedom often leads to pride – it has to do with the love of the power that unlimited freedom affords us, the illusion that we don't need to belong anywhere, to anyone, to let our lives matter. We are free to walk out the door, free to leave if we get upset – it's a freedom rooted in consumerism. The painful irony is that as we are free to not risk belonging, our shame expands its territory. Shame is the reason so many people spend their whole lives trying to fit in everywhere, yet fearful of belonging anywhere. It's not easy: belonging is risky, not least because it might diminish our freedom. Is there a love free enough to embrace us without erasing us? Freedom and Belonging, Pride and Shame.

We carry this tension with us, and in us. Or maybe it's better to say that this tension carries us, our lives a set of responses to these drives. Maybe it's this tension that has us so wearied; so afraid as a society to belong, we call our quest one for independence, but sometimes I wonder if what we are most seeking is a cure for our weighty loneliness. Exhausted under this burden, we seek what hits of stimulation we can to feel more alive.

When Jesus died, he died a shameful death at the hands of religious and political pride. And maybe when Jesus was raised from the dead, maybe when he broke the bonds of death, it was this bond that he broke. And maybe when he showed up to Paul in his shame and breathed forth a word of belonging, he gave existence to a new way of being, a new way of being community.

And besides, both pride and shame are simply exhausting. We just weren't meant to carry them. And the only thing that heals the ancient wound that I know of is an encounter with Transcendent Love; a love bigger than the burdens we carry, but intimate enough to share their load. This Transcendent Love who showed up on Damascus Road in AD 30, also showed up on Concord Road in AD 1874. Now I'm not sure what exactly that

conversation between the Risen One and our Howard Snelling involved, but I imagine our founding member received a similar charter as Paul, and that charter holds for us today.

Be a place where people's sense of freedom is enlarged because it is anchored in belonging. Be like me: a place where the bags of shame and regret and defeat are left behind. Let my Spirit – that pride-smashing, shame-soothing power – enlarge your heart until it becomes like God's: a place where everything you see, and everything you touch becomes freer because it belongs.

I wonder what luggage you brought to church this morning. I wonder if you believe you belong to God. If you are unsure of this whole God thing, or harder still this Jesus thing, I invite you to think about Communion this morning as the Table of Belonging. And at this table, I invite you to leave a thing or two behind. And as you do, receive the blessing of this Transcendent Love that meets travelers on their way. Don't worry about intellectually believing it, let your heart lead. Let it believe there is a Love bigger than our shame, and gentler than our pride. Receive the Breath of Jesus' Spirit, and let him speak that word our minds at once doubt could be real, and our hearts long to be true: The way you'll know you've been encountered by Transcendent Love is when you – your imagination, your heart, and your mind – are awakened and your soul dances free.

