

The Blanket

John 17:20-26

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Please excuse the grammatical errors, this is my spoken version.

A person's last wishes are usually the deepest desires of their hearts. Jesus desire for us, expressed in this prayer shortly before his death, was that his disciples should be one.... united first to him and through him... united to one another...his church as one body with Christ as our head.

But Jesus knew how difficult that would be. He knew the divisions that would come to tear us apart. Jesus knew the word *church* for us, would come to mean a certain denomination, Catholic or Lutheran or Presbyterian, one that follows a particular set of creeds and claims a specific theology, liberal or conservative. He knew that each church would come to create its own styles of worship and music, traditional and contemporary, and that congregations would each meet in a particular building with a unique offering of programs and that in the end, there would be multitudes of these churches to choose from.

Jesus knew that our identity would become not so much in what we have in common, but by what it is that makes us different.

Theologians now have to distinguish between the two by using a capital C when talking about the universal church that Jesus prayed for, and a small c for the myriad of churches that we've created with our arguing over who has it right and who's doing it all wrong.

Jesus knew that we would begin to think and refer to one another as, "those other guys."..... You hear that a lot when someone leaves to join a different church or comes here to Westminster, don't you? If someone goes to South Hills Bible Chapel or Christ United Methodist, we tend to act as if they've jumped ship and now they're playing for the rival team.

There is no rival team in Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul reminds us "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all." We *belong* together united in our Lord, Jesus Christ.

This feeling of belonging is something we crave. We long to fit in somewhere, we long to be an important, contributing member of something. When our kids go off to school we encourage them.. right away to join some things, join some clubs or sports teams so you feel like you belong, like you fit in somewhere and we do the same when we move to a new neighborhood or start a new job.

But the problem with clubs, groups, teams... actually, the problem with all of the institutions of this world, is that in every one of them our membership is unstable. At any given moment we can find ourselves on the outside looking in, our relationship revoked for one reason or another.

I remember one day in February years ago, when our oldest daughter came home upset from middle school. Anna had been sitting the entire year at the same lunch table, enjoying her free time with all of her friends and that day when she went to the cafeteria one of the girls had drawn up a seating chart.. and she wasn't on it. After months of belonging, all of a sudden Anna was out, not welcome, not accepted there anymore...her sense of security was gone.

“Kids can be so cruel,” we say. But unfortunately the experience of rejection isn't limited to childhood. We can find ourselves on the outside of just about anywhere that we thought we belonged to in our lives. The rug can be pulled out from under us.

In today's economy, employees who thought they would be retiring from their jobs come in one day to a pink slip. They're told to clean out their desk and move on, we won't be needing you anymore, we can't afford you anymore.

There are sports teams where you just didn't make the final cut this year, you weren't good enough, somebody better came along, universities where you didn't make the grades... congregations where you didn't meet the standards,

Even the vows of our closest relationships can be rescinded when love is lost. Ties with relatives are severed when we are unable to forgive.

No wonder, we have a fear of not belonging.

Just before Christmas this year Ashley and I were out at the store and found an amazing throw blanket. It's made out of a fabric like a soft brown teddy bear. We couldn't resist, we brought two home thinking the six Yeager's could share over the holidays as we snuggled up on the couch together watching movies.

But the blanket was so good, we got selfish. We ended up going back that same night to get one more so that each of the three people now left living at home, would have their own.

This was working well, but then Alex came home from college, and she saw each Yeager bundled up in a blanket. With her hands on her hips, she jokingly said, “Hey, what's up with this, does it mean that I left home for college and now I'm not a member of this family?”

Needless to say, three more blankets appeared over the holidays. And somehow, this teddy bear- like blanket has become the Official Yeager Clan Tartan! The blanket for us, became our symbol of *belonging*.

And, I noticed when I was straightening things up around the house after Christmas, that one blanket had headed back to Washington, D.C, one is now at the University of Nevada, and another is at Penn State...

I imagine that on the dark and cold winter days, when things aren't going so well, and home is miles and miles away...those blankets are pulled out and snuggled in.

Because, wrapped up in that symbol of belonging is a reminder of family, and there is found safety, security, and love. Wrapped up in acceptance, we find strength, and courage, and hope, so that we can keep trudging on, keep putting one foot in front of another to face another day, to brave the cold winds and jump another hurdle or face another diagnosis to begin another round of treatment.

In just a few minutes, on behalf of Jesus, I will invite you to come and gather at his table for a meal, another symbol, “an outward sign of an inward reality,” as we say the sacraments are.

You and I belong here..... and there's nothing that can take that away from us, nothing that can separate us from the love of our God.

Here at *his* table we're covered in the righteousness of Christ, our sins are forgiven and we're accepted just as we are, blanketed in God's grace, held securely in his love, able to rest safely in God's promises for us.

No person can tell us that we're no longer wanted or needed or loved here. Nothing we've done or failed to do can keep us from belonging here no matter how many times, no matter how badly, we've messed up. We will never find ourselves written out of the seating chart at the table of our Lord. His arms are always open wide to receive us, his voice always ready to welcome us home.

Celebrating this sacrament we not only give thanks and *remember* all that Jesus sacrificed for us, but by the power of the Holy Spirit we believe we're lifted up to him, united with him and with one another, with the saints of all ages and all places, one glorious body worshipping and giving thanks together, praising God for his amazing grace and unfailing love.

There are no differences here, there's no right or wrong way to divide us, no accusing voice to condemn us. Here we are together, at peace with one another in our Lord.

In receiving communion this morning, we are fed and nurtured and sustained for whatever we're facing now, for whatever will come in the weeks ahead. Here hope is restored, courage and strength renewed. We go from this place mounted up on eagle's wings.

You and I belong here..... blanketed in the grace of God, held fast in his eternal love.

Jesus tells us that he is the bread of life.

It says in First Corinthians, "Because there is *one* bread, we who are many are *one* body, for we all partake of the *one* bread."

Let us come now and break bread together on our knees.

Amen