

THIS IS US!– God's Family: Where You Belong?

9/23/18 – Pastor Randy

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not **belong** to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not **belong** to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. – 1 Corinthians 12:12-20 (ESV)

Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, ⁵ so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and **we all belong to each other.**

– Romans 12:4,5 (NLT)

I. The Problem of Loneliness

Public health experts consider loneliness to be a growing epidemic, that is universal in its scope. It adversely impacts our emotional well-being, diminishing our creativity and productivity and when it becomes chronic it harms our bodies as well. Loneliness creates stress which increases blood pressure and cholesterol which if persistent can lead to cardiovascular disease. Loneliness has also been shown to depress our immune systems and has been linked to dementia.

Some surprising facts about loneliness:

1. Marriage isn't the solution. According to Psychology Today, more than 60% of lonely people are married.
2. Loneliness is a bigger issue for youth than the elderly. According to May 1, 2018 article from USAToday.com "Young people are far more likely than senior citizens to report being lonely and in poor health, a surprising survey of 20,000 Americans released Tuesday shows. The overall national loneliness score was alarmingly high at 44 on a 20-to-80 scale, but the prevalence of social isolation among those ages 18 to 22 raises even more concern. The

THIS IS US!– God's Family: Where You Belong?

9/23/18 – Pastor Randy

younger people, part of Generation Z, had loneliness scores of about 48 compared with nearly 39 for those 72 and older.”

3. Loneliness is increasing despite the advances in technology that increase communication. In a HBR article, former US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy wrote, “...we live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization, yet rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s.”

4. Money and education don't seem to diminish its prevalence. In an interview with Murthy published in the Washington Post he stated, “I found that loneliness was a profound issue that was affecting people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. This is true in urban areas, in rural areas, in the heartland of the country and on the coast.”

What is loneliness?

Loneliness involves social isolation but can exist even when a person is socially connected if the social connections are superficial or unhealthy. Being alone is not the same as loneliness. Solitude is an important and necessary spiritual discipline. You can be surrounded by people yet still suffer from loneliness if you don't feel accepted, loved, and cared for by those people.

Loneliness is the by-product of a legitimate, divinely designed need going unmet; the need to belong. God created us as relational beings. You and I were created for relationship.

II. God's Solution to the Problem of Loneliness: The Church

If you took a basic psychology class in high school or an intro to psychology class in college you probably remember learning about Maslow's hierarchy of needs chart. I think Maslow hierarchy is very accurate in many aspects although unfortunately it leaves out our ultimate need which is our need for fellowship with the God Who created us, His Son Who redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit Who regenerated us and is reforming us. But even with the flaws in Maslow's hierarchy of needs he still rightly identified our need to feel like we belong in a social group; the need for healthy human relationships where we feel accepted, loved and cared for. We need a people to belong to and God has provided that vehicle to meet that need.

God Created the Church to Meet our Need for Belonging.

THIS IS US!– God's Family: Where You Belong?

9/23/18 – Pastor Randy

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." – Genesis 2:18

Before the fall of Adam and Eve, before their disobedience that corrupted their communion with God, God said it was not good for man to be alone. God created man to need and crave human companionship. Man wasn't alone in absolute terms. God was with him. But he was without human companionship.

A. We Need to Know We Belong.

In my introduction I cited some of the research that demonstrates that when our belonging needs are not met it has a severe adverse impact on our emotional well being and ultimately on our physical health. When people have a strong sense of belonging in a family or community, they prove to be much more motivated in every area of life. One very important benefit to this sense of belonging is that it also makes us much more resilient in the face of life's obstacles.

Belonging to a community helps you persevere through trials because it opens our eyes to the truth that we are not alone in our experience of pressures and problems. Pressures and problems of life are magnified and intensified when we buy into the distorted perspective that we are suffering alone. Simply knowing that others are walking a similar path – and sometimes an even more difficult path than we are on – reminds us that we are not alone and it places us in a position to encourage others to persevere which God uses as a boomerang of encouragement directed back to ourselves to persevere.

On a Wednesday night in Sept. 2011, firemen came to our door telling us to prepare to evacuate our home because the Susquehanna River which was about 300 feet from our home was expected to rise to record levels and overflow its banks, flooding the homes in our neighborhood. We prepared the house as best we could. That night we didn't sleep too well. Early the next morning the water started flooding our street and I awoke to the noises of neighbors from down the street who were being evacuated. I still remember the stress I felt having no idea how bad it was going to get. We did end up having to leave our house with three feet of water in our basement.

THIS IS US!– God's Family: Where You Belong?

9/23/18 – Pastor Randy

As bad as it was, we were blessed by a team of our church members that lived in our neighborhood and came right over to help with the cleanup. It was a great testimony because we had several neighbors who had either no one or one or two people. But what helped me manage the stress of the damage and loss more than having people help us was overseeing our staff that organized teams of volunteers that went into about 70 homes and businesses over the next few days to assist with cleanup. My greatest moment of stress was before I left my house because in that moment all my focus was on my problem. Once I began to work with my brothers and sisters I realized that my family and I were not alone; there were others who were also walking the same path and many were suffering worse my family was.

B. Steps to Finding Belonging in the Church

1. Make time for relationships. You have to make time and get involved. Participation in a life group and/or ministry team is vital to your sense of belonging in the body. Communication is the essence of relationship. We must place ourselves in situations where we can share our faith and our lives with one another. One reason why I prefer having food in a small group gathering – beyond the simple fact that I love to eat other people's food - is that there is something about sharing food together that creates an atmosphere of openness and sharing. Jesus demonstrated the importance of table fellowship emphatically. In Luke's gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal or coming from a meal. Praying together is another powerful means of creating bonds and a sense of belonging among people. In our groups we need to take time to pray for and with one another, not just next to one another. Serving together is a third powerful means of creating bonds between people and a sense of belonging. Anyone that has served on a ministry team or missions trip can testify to the fact that one of the greatest blessings is the camaraderie and community that develops among the members of the group. Working together necessitates having to problem solve together which creates bonds. Accomplishing an objective together, especially an objective that brings glory to God and blesses people, creates a great sense of belonging.

THIS IS US!– God's Family: Where You Belong?

9/23/18 – Pastor Randy

2. Be a good listener. Show interest in the other person. Being a good listener also means you need to become good at asking questions. That doesn't mean you bombard a person with questions, turning conversations into interrogations, but it does mean that you ask the kind of questions that demonstrate a genuine interest in life of others. A word of caution is in order: Make sure that your questions do not require a deeper level of intimacy than is appropriate for the nature of the relationship. For example, a men's or women's small group that has been meeting for a little while to where the members have developed a healthy degree of trust in one another is a good place to ask each other about what temptations they have struggled with lately. I would not recommend asking that question of someone you are meeting in the lobby of church for the first time.

The simple way of expressing this is, "If you want friends, be a friend."

3. Share yourself. On the flip side of "be a good listener" is to share yourself. Prioritize knowing the other person before making yourself known, not instead of making yourself known. People will not feel close to you if you close yourself off to them. Remember, intimacy needs time to develop. Do not overwhelm other people you have just met by revealing all of your deepest fears, hurts, struggles or your deepest joys and hopes in your first conversation.

4. Look for ways to serve people.

People are not looking for problems; they are looking for solutions. If you are a problem, you will repel people. If you are a solution you will attract people. Again, at the heart of this truth is the principle that you need to first seek to serve before you seek to be served. Ask yourself, "How can I add value to the lives of those around me?" rather than asking, "How can others increase my value?"

C. The Church Helps Meet Our Greatest Belonging Need

So God created us with a need for human relationships; a need to belong to a community of people. But our belonging needs extend beyond the need to have a family or community in which we belong. There is a greater need for belonging that no other group or community can help us develop like the

THIS IS US!– God's Family: Where You Belong?

9/23/18 – Pastor Randy

church can; the need to know we belong to God! Our ultimate need is our need for fellowship with the God Who created us, His Son Who redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit Who regenerated us and is reforming us. God has created us with a hunger for transcendence. Before your eyes glaze over and you check out on me, let me explain what that means. We were created with a need for belonging. That need is met partially by finding a group of people with whom we belong. But our need for transcendent belonging refers to our need to know if, and where we belong in the universe; the created order. Another way of expressing this hunger is that it is the desire to know that my life has purpose and meaning beyond my group. Do I belong? Is another way of asking, "Why do I exist?" "If I lose, or am without, the people to whom I belong, is there something or someone greater to which I belong?"

The good news is YES! You were created by God to belong to God. God created mankind and redeemed mankind to be a people for His presence. The idea that Christians individually and the church corporately belongs to God is woven throughout the whole Bible. In 2 Corinthians 6:16 Paul quoted from Leviticus 26 when he wrote, *For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, **"I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*** That statement is repeated in slightly different ways over and over again throughout the OT and in Revelation 21 it is finally and fully realized. Both Paul and Peter express the truth that we belong to God by speaking of the church as "a people for his own possession".

Here is why the church is so important. Through the church your sense of belonging to God and with God is nurtured. Ephesians says 2:22 says, In Christ you (plural) also are being built together into a **dwelling place for God by the Spirit.** The Holy Spirit creates in us our sense of belonging to God. The Holy Spirit makes possible real, intimate communion and relationship with God. (Rom. 8:15 & Galatians 4:6). So the Holy Spirit Who dwells in the believer, makes real to the believer that he/she belongs to God. If, not only the believer, but the church is a **dwelling place for God by the Spirit** then the church is God's vehicle for creating a powerful sense of belonging; both our belonging to God and to one another!!

THIS IS US!– God's Family: Where You Belong?

9/23/18 – Pastor Randy

Sexual intimacy is not the answer to loneliness.
Marriage is not the answer to loneliness.