

**Together for Good Sermon Series**  
***Together We Belong***  
**Ephesians 2:1-22**  
**By Rev. Joy W. Laughridge**  
**Oct. 25, 2020**

There is a longing inside all of us that is a longing to belong. As you think back over your life, you can probably think of times when you wanted to belong, and you tried to belong somewhere. You might have some negative memories of times when you wanted and tried to belong, but it didn't happen. Maybe a group of "mean girls" or popular kids at school rejected you. Maybe there was a team you didn't get picked for or a club you didn't get in to. Maybe you grew up in the foster care system, and even if you had wonderful and loving foster parents along the way, you always felt like an outsider in those families. In spite of any negative memories you might have, hopefully you have also found your belonging places along the way because having those places truly is essential to our health and well-being. Psychologist and writer Brené Brown has said, "A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick."

Our Scripture passage for this morning comes from the letter to the Ephesians. Paul was writing to a group of people who knew what it was like to be outsiders who didn't belong. These were Gentile believers who had been on the outside of Judaism. In order to remain ceremonially clean and undefiled, religious Jews avoided contact with them. The temple was constructed in such a way that the Gentiles were barred from access to the inner courts and the Holy of Holies by a huge wall. The message that they were not part of God's family had been clear, but in this letter, Paul announces the good news that Jesus had changed all of that. Now, because of Jesus, they could be, and they *were*, insiders and members of God's family. Now, because of Jesus, they belonged. Let's listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 2.

**You were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup>All of us once lived among them in the passions of our**

flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. <sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— <sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup> He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup> So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

In the first half of this passage, in verses 1-10, Paul describes their lives while they were still outsiders. He describes how they were at odds with God when they were following their own natural and sinful instincts, and he points out that that is actually a human problem and not just a Gentile problem. “You were by nature children of wrath *like everyone else*,” he says. He goes on to talk about God’s choice to remove the sins that were a barrier

to their communion with God through the work of Jesus, and the icing on the cake is that this forgiveness, and full acceptance by God is a completely unmerited, free gift of God's grace. Belonging to God as God's beloved child is a blessing they had received, and the opportunity to belong to God as God's sons and daughters had been opened up to them through Christ.

After talking about this wonderful gift of belonging to God that they have received, in the second half of the passage, he turns to the subject of what this means for their relationship with others. He tells these believing Gentiles who were once considered outsiders, that the category of insiders and outsiders doesn't exist in the family that has now been created through Christ. Jesus has made the two groups into one. There is no longer Jew and Gentile but one single group of forgiven and restored people that God has joined together as the Body of Christ and a dwelling place for God.

Our theme for this second Sunday of our stewardship emphasis is "Together We Belong," and the idea is that together we are a community that is a place to belong ourselves and that together we are a community that can become a belonging place for others. Any group can say that about themselves, and lots of different groups can be belonging places, but when we say it as a church what makes the claim unique is that it isn't based on the fact that we make it a place where people can belong. The church is a place to belong together because of the truths that we've just read here in Ephesians. The fact that the church is a place to belong is God's doing. God is the one who offers to everyone the free gift of belonging to Him through Christ, and God is the one who then gives us to one another and enables us to be one diverse but inclusive united family.

That God is willing to extend God's unconditional acceptance to all of us no matter who we are or what we have done is profoundly good news for all people who have that irreducible need for a sense of love and belonging, and that God has formed a community of people who can express, and show, and share that acceptance is also profoundly good news. The church can truly be a place of belonging like no other and yet sadly we know that sometimes in reality people have not experienced churches as welcoming and inclusive communities. They have not experienced them as places that helped them hear and know the truth that they can come to God with whatever past or present may be theirs and belong to God, and they have been shamed or treated as unacceptable to the gathered community for any number of reasons - because their hair was too long, or their clothes didn't look right, or because they had the wrong kind of friends. There are too many sad stories of how churches have pushed people away for failing to meet some religious standards, or they have excluded some who wanted to come

near because they didn't conform to some expected pattern. I know it is easy to put ourselves in the position of righteous judge (it's always easy to do that) and to think "what awful people are in those unwelcoming churches," but if we take a more gracious approach we might conclude that it isn't that those unwelcoming churches are full of people who just like to be mean, as much as they may be full of people who simply have not understood the truths that we heard Paul proclaim to the Ephesians.

It is not easy to be a person who is deeply gracious and accepting of others where and how they are, if one has not realized that that is what God does for us. If we are filled with shame ourselves and we are constantly working to make ourselves acceptable to God, it's natural that we would expect others to have to work just as hard as we do. Similarly, if I think I belong to God because of what I have done, because I am such a good person, I will expect that others ought to be as good as I am and if they aren't it is easy to judge them for their failure. The failure to understand that we are accepted by grace through faith alone doesn't just make it difficult to accept new people in, but it also makes it difficult to be at peace with others in a community. We naturally want to raise up all the different kinds of dividing walls that we think will protect us, or purify us in some way, and then we don't end up with a diverse and inclusive community. Instead we have homogenous little groups that are not easy places for people to experience a sense of belonging if they don't fit the mold.

God's dream and desire for the church is that we would be a community of people who are free from shame and who know that we have received the amazing gifts of God's unconditional love and acceptance. And that having understood that, God's desire is that together as the body of Christ, that we would extend that same love and acceptance to others that Christ did in his ministry on earth. Some of my favorite stories in the New Testament are the ones in which outsiders and outcasts have an encounter with Jesus and find that they are welcomed, forgiven, and loved. Zacchaeus the hated tax collector. The unnamed woman who was caught in adultery. The woman at the well. Saul, the murderous hater of Jesus's followers. Our city is full of people who are outsiders or who feel like outsiders. It is full of people who long to have a place to belong that have yet to find one, and God has put us together and given us the opportunity to be Christ to those people. When we understand that we are set free to embrace our role as the Body of Christ, existing in the world as a place of welcome, and acceptance and belonging, and that's when God really begins to make a difference in people's lives through us.

Throughout its almost 70 years, God has been making a difference in people's lives through this church. One of the things that is often said and celebrated about Lakewood is that this is a welcoming, loving, accepting community and that it is easy to belong here. Some of that certainly does have to do with the unique people and personalities who make up this congregation, but God's word reminds us today that our ability to belong here ourselves and our ability to extend the gift of belonging to others is firmly rooted and grounded in what God has done for us and in what God continues to do in us through Christ.

In the context of stewardship season, I hope that you will think about how Lakewood has been a place for you to discover that you belong to God and how it has been a place for you to experience belonging with others. I hope that you will think about what a difference that has made in your life, but I hope that you won't just think about yourself. I hope that you will think about all of those people in our community who don't know yet that God longs for them to come close and to know that they are loved and accepted. I hope you will think about the people in our community who feel like the church is not a place for them and have fears about stepping through the doors of a church for fear of what the reaction to their presence would be. I hope you will think about those who have been hurt by church members who did not remember or realize that they were accepted by grace through faith and *not* by works, and as you do, I hope that you will be inspired to recommit yourselves to the mission and ministry of Lakewood so that we can go on being a place of welcome and belonging for all who are nearby and are seeking that. Amen.

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God's dream and desire for the church is that we would be a community of people who are free from shame and who know that we have received the amazing gifts of God's unconditional love and acceptance. And that having understood that, God's desire is that together as the body of Christ, that we would extend that same love and acceptance to others that Christ did in his ministry on earth. Some of my favorite stories in the New Testament are the ones in which outsiders and outcasts have an encounter with Jesus and find that they are welcomed, forgiven, and loved. Zacchaeus the hated tax collector. The unnamed woman who was caught in adultery. The woman at the well. Saul, the murderous hater of Jesus's followers. Our city is full of people who are outsiders or who feel like outsiders. It is full of people who long to have a place to belong that have yet to find one, and God has put us together and given us the opportunity to be Christ to those people. When we understand that we are set free to embrace our role as the Body of Christ, existing in the world as a place of welcome, and acceptance and belonging, and that's when God really begins to make a difference in people's lives through us.

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**Together for Good Sermon Series**  
***Together We Belong***  
**Ephesians 2:1-22**  
**By Rev. Joy W. Laughridge**  
**Oct. 25, 2020**

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flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. <sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— <sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup> He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup> So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

In the first half of this passage, in verses 1-10, Paul describes their lives while they were still outsiders. He describes how they were at odds with God when they were following their own natural and sinful instincts, and he points out that that is actually a human problem and not just a Gentile problem. “You were by nature children of wrath *like everyone else*,” he says. He goes on to talk about God’s choice to remove the sins that were a barrier

to their communion with God through the work of Jesus, and the icing on the cake is that this forgiveness, and full acceptance by God is a completely unmerited, free gift of God's grace. Belonging to God as God's beloved child is a blessing they had received, and the opportunity to belong to God as God's sons and daughters had been opened up to them through Christ.

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After talking about this wonderful gift of belonging to God that they have received, in the second half of the passage, he turns to the subject of what this means for their relationship with others. He tells these believing Gentiles who were once considered outsiders, that the category of insiders and outsiders doesn't exist in the family that has now been created through Christ. Jesus has made the two groups into one. There is no longer Jew and Gentile but one single group of forgiven and restored people that God has joined together as the Body of Christ and a dwelling place for God.

Our theme for this second Sunday of our stewardship emphasis is "Together We Belong," and the idea is that together we are a community that is a place to belong ourselves and that together we are a community that can become a belonging place for others. Any group can say that about themselves, and lots of different groups can be belonging places, but when we say it as a church what makes the claim unique is that it isn't based on the fact that we make it a place where people can belong. The church is a place to belong together because of the truths that we've just read here in Ephesians. The fact that the church is a place to belong is God's doing. God is the one who offers to everyone the free gift of belonging to Him through Christ, and God is the one who then gives us to one another and enables us to be one diverse but inclusive united family.

That God is willing to extend God's unconditional acceptance to all of us no matter who we are or what we have done is profoundly good news for all people who have that irreducible need for a sense of love and belonging, and that God has formed a community of people who can express, and show, and share that acceptance is also profoundly good news. The church can truly be a place of belonging like no other and yet sadly we know that sometimes in reality people have not experienced churches as welcoming and inclusive communities. They have not experienced them as places that helped them hear and know the truth that they can come to God with whatever past or present may be theirs and belong to God, and they have been shamed or treated as unacceptable to the gathered community for any number of reasons - because their hair was too long, or their clothes didn't look right, or because they had the wrong kind of friends. There are too many sad stories of how churches have pushed people away for failing to meet some religious standards, or they have excluded some who wanted to come

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It is not easy to be a person who is deeply gracious and accepting of others where and how they are, if one has not realized that that is what God does for us. If we are filled with shame ourselves and we are constantly working to make ourselves acceptable to God, it's natural that we would expect others to have to work just as hard as we do. Similarly, if I think I belong to God because of what I have done, because I am such a good person, I will expect that others ought to be as good as I am and if they aren't it is easy to judge them for their failure. The failure to understand that we are accepted by grace through faith alone doesn't just make it difficult to accept new people in, but it also makes it difficult to be at peace with others in a community. We naturally want to raise up all the different kinds of dividing walls that we think will protect us, or purify us in some way, and then we don't end up with a diverse and inclusive community. Instead we have homogenous little groups that are not easy places for people to experience a sense of belonging if they don't fit the mold.

God's dream and desire for the church is that we would be a community of people who are free from shame and who know that we have received the amazing gifts of God's unconditional love and acceptance. And that having understood that, God's desire is that together as the body of Christ, that we would extend that same love and acceptance to others that Christ did in his ministry on earth. Some of my favorite stories in the New Testament are the ones in which outsiders and outcasts have an encounter with Jesus and find that they are welcomed, forgiven, and loved. Zacchaeus the hated tax collector. The unnamed woman who was caught in adultery. The woman at the well. Saul, the murderous hater of Jesus's followers. Our city is full of people who are outsiders or who feel like outsiders. It is full of people who long to have a place to belong that have yet to find one, and God has put us together and given us the opportunity to be Christ to those people. When we understand that we are set free to embrace our role as the Body of Christ, existing in the world as a place of welcome, and acceptance and belonging, and that's when God really begins to make a difference in people's lives through us.

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**Together for Good Sermon Series**  
***Together We Belong***  
**Ephesians 2:1-22**  
**By Rev. Joy W. Laughridge**  
**Oct. 25, 2020**

There is a longing inside all of us that is a longing to belong. As you think back over your life, you can probably think of times when you wanted to belong, and you tried to belong somewhere. You might have some negative memories of times when you wanted and tried to belong, but it didn't happen. Maybe a group of "mean girls" or popular kids at school rejected you. Maybe there was a team you didn't get picked for or a club you didn't get in to. Maybe you grew up in the foster care system, and even if you had wonderful and loving foster parents along the way, you always felt like an outsider in those families. In spite of any negative memories you might have, hopefully you have also found your belonging places along the way because having those places truly is essential to our health and well-being. Psychologist and writer Brené Brown has said, "A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick."

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**You were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup>All of us once lived among them in the passions of our**

flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. <sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— <sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup> He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup> So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

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flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. <sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

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to their communion with God through the work of Jesus, and the icing on the cake is that this forgiveness, and full acceptance by God is a completely unmerited, free gift of God's grace. Belonging to God as God's beloved child is a blessing they had received, and the opportunity to belong to God as God's sons and daughters had been opened up to them through Christ.

After talking about this wonderful gift of belonging to God that they have received, in the second half of the passage, he turns to the subject of what this means for their relationship with others. He tells these believing Gentiles who were once considered outsiders, that the category of insiders and outsiders doesn't exist in the family that has now been created through Christ. Jesus has made the two groups into one. There is no longer Jew and Gentile but one single group of forgiven and restored people that God has joined together as the Body of Christ and a dwelling place for God.

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That God is willing to extend God's unconditional acceptance to all of us no matter who we are or what we have done is profoundly good news for all people who have that irreducible need for a sense of love and belonging, and that God has formed a community of people who can express, and show, and share that acceptance is also profoundly good news. The church can truly be a place of belonging like no other and yet sadly we know that sometimes in reality people have not experienced churches as welcoming and inclusive communities. They have not experienced them as places that helped them hear and know the truth that they can come to God with whatever past or present may be theirs and belong to God, and they have been shamed or treated as unacceptable to the gathered community for any number of reasons - because their hair was too long, or their clothes didn't look right, or because they had the wrong kind of friends. There are too many sad stories of how churches have pushed people away for failing to meet some religious standards, or they have excluded some who wanted to come

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It is not easy to be a person who is deeply gracious and accepting of others where and how they are, if one has not realized that that is what God does for us. If we are filled with shame ourselves and we are constantly working to make ourselves acceptable to God, it's natural that we would expect others to have to work just as hard as we do. Similarly, if I think I belong to God because of what I have done, because I am such a good person, I will expect that others ought to be as good as I am and if they aren't it is easy to judge them for their failure. The failure to understand that we are accepted by grace through faith alone doesn't just make it difficult to accept new people in, but it also makes it difficult to be at peace with others in a community. We naturally want to raise up all the different kinds of dividing walls that we think will protect us, or purify us in some way, and then we don't end up with a diverse and inclusive community. Instead we have homogenous little groups that are not easy places for people to experience a sense of belonging if they don't fit the mold.

God's dream and desire for the church is that we would be a community of people who are free from shame and who know that we have received the amazing gifts of God's unconditional love and acceptance. And that having understood that, God's desire is that together as the body of Christ, that we would extend that same love and acceptance to others that Christ did in his ministry on earth. Some of my favorite stories in the New Testament are the ones in which outsiders and outcasts have an encounter with Jesus and find that they are welcomed, forgiven, and loved. Zacchaeus the hated tax collector. The unnamed woman who was caught in adultery. The woman at the well. Saul, the murderous hater of Jesus's followers. Our city is full of people who are outsiders or who feel like outsiders. It is full of people who long to have a place to belong that have yet to find one, and God has put us together and given us the opportunity to be Christ to those people. When we understand that we are set free to embrace our role as the Body of Christ, existing in the world as a place of welcome, and acceptance and belonging, and that's when God really begins to make a difference in people's lives through us.

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**Ephesians 2:1-22**  
**By Rev. Joy W. Laughridge**  
**Oct. 25, 2020**

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**Together for Good Sermon Series**  
***Together We Belong***  
**Ephesians 2:1-22**  
**By Rev. Joy W. Laughridge**  
**Oct. 25, 2020**

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to their communion with God through the work of Jesus, and the icing on the cake is that this forgiveness, and full acceptance by God is a completely unmerited, free gift of God's grace. Belonging to God as God's beloved child is a blessing they had received, and the opportunity to belong to God as God's sons and daughters had been opened up to them through Christ.

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That God is willing to extend God's unconditional acceptance to all of us no matter who we are or what we have done is profoundly good news for all people who have that irreducible need for a sense of love and belonging, and that God has formed a community of people who can express, and show, and share that acceptance is also profoundly good news. The church can truly be a place of belonging like no other and yet sadly we know that sometimes in reality people have not experienced churches as welcoming and inclusive communities. They have not experienced them as places that helped them hear and know the truth that they can come to God with whatever past or present may be theirs and belong to God, and they have been shamed or treated as unacceptable to the gathered community for any number of reasons - because their hair was too long, or their clothes didn't look right, or because they had the wrong kind of friends. There are too many sad stories of how churches have pushed people away for failing to meet some religious standards, or they have excluded some who wanted to come

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It is not easy to be a person who is deeply gracious and accepting of others where and how they are, if one has not realized that that is what God does for us. If we are filled with shame ourselves and we are constantly working to make ourselves acceptable to God, it's natural that we would expect others to have to work just as hard as we do. Similarly, if I think I belong to God because of what I have done, because I am such a good person, I will expect that others ought to be as good as I am and if they aren't it is easy to judge them for their failure. The failure to understand that we are accepted by grace through faith alone doesn't just make it difficult to accept new people in, but it also makes it difficult to be at peace with others in a community. We naturally want to raise up all the different kinds of dividing walls that we think will protect us, or purify us in some way, and then we don't end up with a diverse and inclusive community. Instead we have homogenous little groups that are not easy places for people to experience a sense of belonging if they don't fit the mold.

God's dream and desire for the church is that we would be a community of people who are free from shame and who know that we have received the amazing gifts of God's unconditional love and acceptance. And that having understood that, God's desire is that together as the body of Christ, that we would extend that same love and acceptance to others that Christ did in his ministry on earth. Some of my favorite stories in the New Testament are the ones in which outsiders and outcasts have an encounter with Jesus and find that they are welcomed, forgiven, and loved. Zacchaeus the hated tax collector. The unnamed woman who was caught in adultery. The woman at the well. Saul, the murderous hater of Jesus's followers. Our city is full of people who are outsiders or who feel like outsiders. It is full of people who long to have a place to belong that have yet to find one, and God has put us together and given us the opportunity to be Christ to those people. When we understand that we are set free to embrace our role as the Body of Christ, existing in the world as a place of welcome, and acceptance and belonging, and that's when God really begins to make a difference in people's lives through us.

Throughout its almost 70 years, God has been making a difference in people's lives through this church. One of the things that is often said and celebrated about Lakewood is that this is a welcoming, loving, accepting community and that it is easy to belong here. Some of that certainly does have to do with the unique people and personalities who make up this congregation, but God's word reminds us today that our ability to belong here ourselves and our ability to extend the gift of belonging to others is firmly rooted and grounded in what God has done for us and in what God continues to do in us through Christ.

In the context of stewardship season, I hope that you will think about how Lakewood has been a place for you to discover that you belong to God and how it has been a place for you to experience belonging with others. I hope that you will think about what a difference that has made in your life, but I hope that you won't just think about yourself. I hope that you will think about all of those people in our community who don't know yet that God longs for them to come close and to know that they are loved and accepted. I hope you will think about the people in our community who feel like the church is not a place for them and have fears about stepping through the doors of a church for fear of what the reaction to their presence would be. I hope you will think about those who have been hurt by church members who did not remember or realize that they were accepted by grace through faith and *not* by works, and as you do, I hope that you will be inspired to recommit yourselves to the mission and ministry of Lakewood so that we can go on being a place of welcome and belonging for all who are nearby and are seeking that. Amen.

**Together for Good Sermon Series**  
***Together We Belong***  
**Ephesians 2:1-22**  
**By Rev. Joy W. Laughridge**  
**Oct. 25, 2020**

There is a longing inside all of us that is a longing to belong. As you think back over your life, you can probably think of times when you wanted to belong, and you tried to belong somewhere. You might have some negative memories of times when you wanted and tried to belong, but it didn't happen. Maybe a group of "mean girls" or popular kids at school rejected you. Maybe there was a team you didn't get picked for or a club you didn't get in to. Maybe you grew up in the foster care system, and even if you had wonderful and loving foster parents along the way, you always felt like an outsider in those families. In spite of any negative memories you might have, hopefully you have also found your belonging places along the way because having those places truly is essential to our health and well-being. Psychologist and writer Brené Brown has said, "A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick."

Our Scripture passage for this morning comes from the letter to the Ephesians. Paul was writing to a group of people who knew what it was like to be outsiders who didn't belong. These were Gentile believers who had been on the outside of Judaism. In order to remain ceremonially clean and undefiled, religious Jews avoided contact with them. The temple was constructed in such a way that the Gentiles were barred from access to the inner courts and the Holy of Holies by a huge wall. The message that they were not part of God's family had been clear, but in this letter, Paul announces the good news that Jesus had changed all of that. Now, because of Jesus, they could be, and they *were*, insiders and members of God's family. Now, because of Jesus, they belonged. Let's listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 2.

**You were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup>All of us once lived among them in the passions of our**

flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. <sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— <sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup> He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup> So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

In the first half of this passage, in verses 1-10, Paul describes their lives while they were still outsiders. He describes how they were at odds with God when they were following their own natural and sinful instincts, and he points out that that is actually a human problem and not just a Gentile problem. “You were by nature children of wrath *like everyone else*,” he says. He goes on to talk about God’s choice to remove the sins that were a barrier

to their communion with God through the work of Jesus, and the icing on the cake is that this forgiveness, and full acceptance by God is a completely unmerited, free gift of God's grace. Belonging to God as God's beloved child is a blessing they had received, and the opportunity to belong to God as God's sons and daughters had been opened up to them through Christ.

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