

TOOL #1: BELONGING

ACTS 2:42-47

You can still catch the sitcom “Cheers” on reruns. As many of you know, “Cheers” is a show about some deeply flawed but ultimately loveable characters that congregate regularly at a local bar in Boston. They insult each other, pick on each other and hurt each other’s feelings regularly. But they also come to care about each other in real but admittedly quirky ways. “Cheers” has a very catchy, singable title song. Do you remember the lyrics? “Making your way in the world today takes everything you’ve got. Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot. Wouldn’t you like to get away? Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they’re always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see, our troubles are all the same. You wanna be where everybody knows your name. You wanna go where people know, people are all the same. You wanna go where everybody knows your name.” (Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo)

That song articulates a fundamental need found in every human being whether you’re a follower of Jesus or not. It’s the need to belong. Everyone needs to be known, loved and appreciated by other people. But here’s something that bothers me. Many people don’t consider a local church like Karl Road Baptist Church to be the place where they will have that need to belong met. They don’t see the local church as the best place to receive acceptance, encouragement and appreciation. Instead, it may be the local bar like in the show “Cheers.” Or it may be a civic club, the group of parents on your kid’s athletic team, the school’s PTO organization or a group of friends at work. There’s nothing wrong with any of those groups, but when they become the primary vehicle to meet the need for belonging that God has put within you, there’s a problem. After your family, God has always intended for your need to belong to be met primarily in and through His Church – a local expression of His presence, His grace and His love.

Last Sunday we began a month long consideration of our new mission and vision. We’re calling it “Mission Possible.” Let’s take a moment to recite our new mission statement together. “We seek to glorify God by building a family of believers passionate about Him where people are loved the way they are, urged to become more like Christ and equipped to share Christ in word and deed.” Last week we considered the target, the goal or the bottom line of our church as we move forward. Very simply, it’s the glory of God. Today and the next two Sundays I want to explore with you three tools to help us reach that goal of glorifying God. We call them belonging, becoming and building. Today I want to focus with you on belonging. It’s expressed in the next phrase in that mission statement: “...where people are loved the way they are....” If we can promote and practice a godly sense of belonging, it will be one way to bring glory to God or give glory to God. Belonging is one tool to help us hit the target: God’s glory.

Let’s look at our primary text for today’s message just now (Acts 2:42-47). That’s a snapshot of the very first local church that every existed. It was started in the

city of Jerusalem shortly after Jesus went back up into Heaven. That passage tells us that those first followers of Jesus devoted themselves to four expressions of their new faith: teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread (which was sort of a combination of a pot-luck dinner and the Lord's Supper all wrapped up in one event) and prayer. "They devoted themselves... to fellowship." You could translate it just as faithfully as "they devoted themselves to belonging." That's the phrase and the concept I want us to think about together today. How can a church create, promote and practice belonging? First of all ...

BELONGING DEMANDS INTENTIONALITY.

"They devoted themselves to fellowship (to belonging)." That word "devoted" describes a conscious choice and a deliberate decision. Jesus used the same word when He explained the kind of single-minded commitment to God you need to have: "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Mt 6:24 NLT) That word "devoted" carries with it the idea of intentionality, of purpose, of effort, doesn't it? When you devote yourself to do something, you set your mind to do it and it affects your behavior, your choices, how you spend your time – everything. For the members of the first local church, that meant getting together often to praise God, to learn more about what it meant to follow Jesus, to pray together and to encourage one another. They were devoted to belonging.

That scripture and my own experience as a pastor now for over thirty years, leads me to a conclusion I defy you to disprove. Belonging doesn't just happen in any local church. A sense of strong relational and spiritual community doesn't just create itself spontaneously or magically. There has to be a sense of intentionality in a variety of ways if that need to belong is met. For example, a church must deliberately create structures where belonging can happen. Intentionality is needed because belonging demands structures. It's my belief that our church has done pretty well in this area historically. Our Sunday morning adult Bible classes have been and still are one of the strongest areas of our church's life and ministry. Some of our classes have been together for decades and a strong sense of belonging is present. More recently, we've seen several strong small groups that meet in people's homes begin to emerge.

I'm convinced that we need to create some new classes and some new small groups simply because it's easier to get new people to join new classes or new groups than existing ones. That might be a ministry area for you to consider – teaching a new Sunday adult class or leading a new small group. In addition, any group in the church that exists to perform a specific ministry – the choir, our Wednesday night clubs, our Tuesday morning work team, the new sensory break room we heard about today – is another structure where the need to belong can be met. That's another place people get to know you and you get to know other people. The song goes, "Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows

your name, and they're always glad you came.... You wanna be where everybody knows your name." I'm not sure there is a better structure to promote belonging than a Sunday adult class, a small group or a group that exists to provide a specific ministry to the church family or community.

Secondly, intentionality is needed because belonging demands effort. Belonging doesn't just happen. With effort comes personal initiative. So, are you in a Sunday School class? Are you a part of a small group? Do you engage in ministry with a team or group of other people regularly? This church can be intentional by creating wonderful opportunities for you to get connected and have a strong sense of belonging. But creating a culture of belonging works in both directions. The church has got to do some stuff. And you have to do some stuff. If you never take the initiative to join a Sunday School class, a small group, or a ministry team doing some kind of good work in the community or in the church, you will never feel like you belong. I'll make a prediction today. If you've been coming to our worship service for six months or more, but that's all you do (no Sunday School class, no small group, no ministry group involvement), here's what's going to happen in most cases. You're going to drop out or start attending another church. After awhile, most people start thinking like this: "You know, I'm not getting much out of Karl Road Baptist Church anymore. Pastor Rick's messages are all starting to sound the same. The music sounds the same. I'd be surprised if any of those people at Karl Road even know my name!" My friend, let me respond in a way that I believe is divinely inspired, "Well, duh!"

Intentionality has a personal dimension, too. For instance, belonging happens when you offer encouragement intentionally. The Bible says, "So encourage each other and build each other up...." (1 Th 5:11 NLT) Every Sunday discouraged people walk into this building. We live in a discouraging world – a world that constantly reminds you of all the ways you don't measure up. Encouragement doesn't just happen. It's requires intentional effort. God is glorified when you offer someone a warm smile, an affirming hug, an uplifting word, a thoughtful e-mail, even a brief prayer asking God to help someone facing a discouragement in his or her life. Who are you encouraging?

All of us have read or seen something about the Special Olympics – those athletic contests for special needs people. Something very special indeed happened at a recent one. The event was the 100 meter dash. The race started and half way to the finish line, one of the participants tripped and fell. Every single one of the other runners stopped, gathered around their fallen comrade, picked him up and then – all together – as a group, they crossed the finish line. Those special people have something to teach us in the Body of Christ, don't they? It takes effort to be encouraging, but belonging depends on it.

Belonging happens when you offer acceptance intentionally. The Bible says, "Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love." (Eph 4:2 NLT) People are going to be

different than you. Some are going to have different ideas on how to do ministry, different worship preferences or have different priorities spiritually. Other people may well be coming out of pretty rough backgrounds morally. They may say or do things that don't sound or look very Christ-like at times. They may not have had the benefit of a godly upbringing. Deal with it! Cut 'em a break! After all, we put up with you! I'm not suggesting we condone sinful lifestyles, but neither should we withdraw from people simply because there is an ongoing struggle with sin. God is doing some chipping and shaping on and in all of us – some more than others, to be sure, but each of us is a saint in the making. It takes effort to be accepting, but belonging depends on it. Who are you accepting?

Belonging happens when you offer service intentionally. The Bible says, “Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith.” (Eph 6:10 NLT) Taking a turn on a Sunday during the service to work with our kids, tutoring a child on Tuesday nights, visiting one of our “shut-ins”, running the sound or video projection or praying faithfully for the church and its leaders are all ways to serve. It takes effort to serve, but belonging depends on it. Who are you serving? How can a church create, promote and practice belonging? Second of all ...

BELONGING DEMANDS INCLUSIVENESS.

Those first Christians struggled mightily in this area. When the apostle Paul wrote, “There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28 NLT), he was referring to three major ways they were excluding one another. Most of the first Christians were ethnic Jews. They'd been taught to despise and stay away from non-Jews. Then thousands of non-Jews began to follow Jesus and the local church didn't look or feel very Jewish anymore. The first Christians lived in a world where many people were bought and sold as slaves. Both free people and slaves began to follow Jesus. An obvious socio-economic gap existed between free people and slaves, but now they were all part of the same local church. The first Christians lived in a world where women weren't considered equal with men by any stretch of the imagination. Before very long gender tensions began to rise to the surface as Christians struggled with how being male or female affected belonging.

Even the first Christian leaders had to learn and re-learn what it meant to be inclusive. Peter, the leader among the original disciples of Jesus, had to get a special vision from God to prepare him to share the message about Jesus with non-Jews. He had to learn that because every person is made by God, he or she has eternal value and worth to God. He articulated what he learned when he said, “It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone.” (Acts 10:34-36 MSG) Peter got it!

No one created by God and who is following Jesus is to be excluded from the community of God's people in the local church.

Does Karl Road Baptist Church struggle with inclusiveness? Sure, we do and we will – just like the first Christians... just like any local church! One of the things I love about this church is its diversity. We have an incredible age range in this church. We have a growing ethnic and racial diversity. We have married people and many singles. We have people who have walked with Jesus for decades and people who just accepted Him as Savior and Lord recently. We have an increasingly broad range of people in terms of socio-economic and educational factors. But while all that diversity is to be celebrated, it creates a kind of pressure or tension that we need to be aware of if a strong sense of belonging is going to prevail. If our church is going to reflect our surrounding community demographically, the number of African-American, Hispanic and Asian members is going to increase. I welcome that change! I hope you do as well. Are you as open and welcoming to a member of a different race as you are to someone from your own ethnicity? Are you open and welcoming to someone from a different level than you financially, educationally or socially? If someone is not on the same level as you in terms of biblical knowledge and understanding, do you tend to marginalize him or her? There's something in all of us that craves being with people that are just like you, but that's not God's priority. Our oneness in Jesus should so eclipse any and every other distinction that nothing else matters.

I hasten to clarify what the Bible means by diversity, however. At present, our culture is in love with the ideas of "tolerance" and "diversity." Our culture defines diversity as the ability to tolerate any behavior or lifestyle regardless. It refuses to identify much of anything as sinful, self-destructive or unacceptable to God. That's not biblical diversity. That's simply an invitation to moral and spiritual chaos. I like how the late Catholic bishop, Fulton J. Sheen, put it, "Tolerance applies only to persons, but never to truth. Intolerance applies only to truth, but never to persons. Tolerance applies to the erring; intolerance to the error."

Author Philip Yancey writes about a prostitute in Chicago. She was down and out, sick and homeless, unable to buy food for her two-year old daughter. She'd sunk to the lowest imaginable levels, doing things she never thought she would do to earn money to survive. She was desperate and looking for help and encouragement. A friend of Yancey's asked her if she'd thought of going to a church for help. A look of pure shock crossed her face, "Church! Why would I ever go there? I already feel terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse." I'm saddened she has that perspective, but she got it from somewhere. True and biblical inclusiveness is all about loving every sinner while hating every sin. But sometimes we Christians have a hard time getting that balance right. Getting it right is key to creating a spiritual culture of belonging.

When we use the word "inclusive" or – as our mission statement says – "loving people the way they are" – we aren't condoning sin in any way, shape or form.

What we have to learn how to do as a congregation is to communicate a message of belonging to everyone through both our words and actions. It needs to sound and feel something like this: "Look, you are a person of eternal worth and value to God. We will never condone or bless sinful, self-destructive behavior in your life, but we will always love you. We're not perfect either. We sin and fail, too. We need the grace of Jesus just as much as you do. You are always welcome at Karl Road Baptist Church. Come and meet Jesus here! Come and get spiritually healthy here! Come and let the Holy Spirit transform and change you here to the glory of God!" Belonging demands inclusiveness.

I want to close today's message by having us all watch a video clip together. It's an effective reminder that a lot of negative, sinful and discouraging messages are being sent to all of us all the time. And, ultimately, it's only Jesus and what He's done for us at the cross and the empty tomb that can bring spiritual healing and a restored sense of belonging. And then after we watch the video I want to share with you how you can help our church continue to grow and develop in the area of belonging.