

**You Belong**  
**Sunday, August 27, 2023, 10:00 a.m.**  
**All Saints Church, Pasadena**  
**The Rev. Dr. Sally Howard**

Good morning All Saints and welcome! I am happy to be speaking to you at this especially wonderful service as we invite new children into the heart of our community through baptism. I can tell you, I've been dancing all week, looking forward to holding one of these babies in my arms, and with you, welcoming them into our family! Thanks be to God!

In this ancient rite of baptism, we declare outwardly, the inner reality that our children, and all children, belong now and forever, to the household of God. You see, baptism is all about who we are as the human family. God calls us to create belonging, beauty, and peace for every child of God who exists. At ASC, it has long been our aspiration to live in the house of love, not in the house of fear. We hope to create sanctuary not only within our community and on our campus, but also to partner with other organizations and faith communities, creating places of dignity and safety in all in the world. Let's reflect on what it means to belong, how we create that sense together, and how our spiritual resources can help us to do it.

To belong means to have a home spiritually, emotionally, and that includes our bodies. We need a sense of belonging to a greater community, something beyond our individual selves. This is critical to our survival and thriving throughout our lives, from the beginning to our earthly end. Belonging and connection are universally healthy and holy human needs that stem from our evolutionary and ancestral roots. We are wired to connect, even before birth. Core to belonging is our connection with others, being known and seen. It's being welcomed, accepted, embraced, and respected. We need to feel acknowledged and valued for who we really are – whatever our identity, background, or age.

We all know the exquisite pain of feeling shut outside, some of us more than others. This can happen for many reasons including the color of our skin, through loss, or how we identify. Also, we cannot separate the importance of an emotional and spiritual sense of belonging from our physical and mental health. Feeling outside or isolated literally damages our health. Our social ties are a powerful protective factor helping us to manage stress. When we feel that we have support and are not alone, we are more resilient, enabling us to effectively cope with difficult times in our world and in our lives.

There is no question that today we are in a belonging crisis. The pandemic upended opportunities for connection through restrictions and isolation, which spurred people to question who they are and what they want. Rates of anxiety, depression and suicide have increased, especially for our youth. Furthermore, our nation is increasingly polarized. We seem to forget the reality of our common humanity and our radical interdependence. Many are adrift in this postmodern world with no sense of secure meaning or common truth, confused by the conflict of competing narratives.

And, even though research indicates that engagement with a faith community can be beneficial to health and well-being, a recent NYT article described a rapid decline of religious involvement in America, across faith communities, including a trend towards “de-churching”. Not surprisingly, a significant factor in the decline in church involvement is the association of church with exclusionary values. Christian nationalism’s vigorous attempt to co-opt God’s dream of turning the human race into the human family, in the interest of political power and enormous benefits for the super-rich, has established a nightmare of violent tribal identity.

Although on very different ends of the field, both Christian nationalism and postmodern secularity share a common belief that difference means rupture. We could think of both narratives as false prophets, bearing bitter fruit. Christian nationalism bears fruits of intolerance and violence as evidenced in the Jan. 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection. In the case of postmodern secularity, the belief that power can never be willingly shared, delivers fruits of despair and loss of hope. What a contrast to our belief, that difference is infinite gift and beauty. We must equip ourselves to bridge the polarization as we offer a story of common goodness and connection that asserts our capacity, with God’s help, to share power, and does not dominate or dishonor difference.

Our lectionary readings and our baptismal rite point to that story. The first chapter is that you belong to God who loves you and knows you down to the number of hairs on your head. God knows and loves the unique creation that each of us is. Our God known and beyond all knowing, is infinite beauty, vastly different from us, but also closer than our own breath. She is our refuge, our secure base, the One who teaches us to walk and hears our cries. Nothing in this life or death, or anything created or to come, can separate us from her love for us. Nothing can ever shake your identity as a beloved child of God and nothing can destroy the brilliant shining diamond at the center of your being. No matter what false narratives or qualifications you may hear about your worth, you belong to God forever. When you understand that love, belonging, and worthiness, are something you are born into, not something you have to earn, anything is possible.

Moreover, the unshakable belovedness that belongs to each of us, is also the birthright of every person that lives, or has lived, or ever will. God dwells in each one of us, no matter how difficult it might sometimes be for us to see in ourselves or each other. Our baptismal vows tell us that God is infinite beauty and peace, Unity Across Diversity. God is Relationship, three in one, an outpouring waterwheel of love ever pouring one to another with infinite abundance. There is no hierarchy in God. There is instead eternal relationship in which difference is infinite gift and beauty; difference as peace, and not rupture.

Our true human destiny is to mirror and grow into God’s likeness of outpouring love by trusting our intrinsic importance to God, not by competing for power and position. We create connection with each other by asking about and hearing each other’s stories; checking in with each other; or welcoming a new face. Sometimes it’s just a smile. Our lesson suggests more-Dancing with the ones who dance for joy, and shedding tears with the ones whose hearts have fallen to the ground. We do not hear paying back evil with evil, but blessing each other.

We create connection by practicing hospitality and inclusion in order to create a world in which everyone belongs. It's about wanting everyone to feel at home in their bodies as much as possible, utilizing music, art, and language. This doesn't mean that all of these practices are comfortable but we follow the way of outpouring love to one another, celebrating our unity and our diversity. It is the way of beauty in our house of love.

Lastly, to belong is literally to have a home to live in. Greg Boyle says that God's kind of belonging means not taking your place at the top of the ladder among those who think they are the best, but at the bottom among those who have either climbed the ladder and fallen, or never gotten enough grip to climb in the first place. ASC has a long tradition of seeking Christ in unhoused people and offering hospitality with our campus and resources. I want to tell you a story about how that hospitality created a sense of belonging for me and one of our unhoused brothers.

When I first came to ASC, I was considering leaving church and Christianity all together. I could not reconcile the exclusion and intolerance I saw in the churches that I knew, and Christian organizations I had been a part of, with what I knew in my heart about God's love. The welcome of the usher who seated me, and the invitation to the table meant I had a home here, even if I didn't know what I believed anymore. I kept coming and a couple of months after my first Sunday, I arrived late and without breakfast. I stopped at the Food ministry table—it's still out there today—I asked for a cookie and they gave me a whole bag. As I headed toward the door, I saw a man out by the tree who was unhoused and mentally ill. I recognized him because he also frequented the campus of the graduate school I attended. We made eye contact, and he looked so hungry. So, we both sat down on the lawn, and ate those cookies together, the two of us. We were both lost and confused, but felt sheltered by the tree and the welcome of this community. I am forever grateful, and you can see, that I never left my home.

As we welcome our babies home today, may we remember the words of Mother Teresa, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

Amen