

Intertwined Belonging

1 Corinthians 3

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First Presbyterian, Luling

The girls and I were remembering this week that for a long time they were the same size. People would often ask if they were twins—they would take turns with each one being 1/2 inch taller than the other each time we measured. During these years, they shared clothes. By that I mean that all their clothes hung in one closet and were folded in one dresser. Shorts, dresses, shirts, pants, it was all just the kids' clothes, no difference. They did have different size and shape feet, so their shoes belonged to each one separately, but the clothes were community property. It was happenstance that they were the same size, but I inwardly congratulated myself that they were learning to share and not be selfish so early in life. Fast forward. Now it is not the two girls that are the same size, but it is Rachel and I who are. Pants don't fit us the same, but everything else does. She has retained her early learning of "what's yours is mine" and believes that my closet is open to her. I am generally not so generous, and we have had some squabbles when something I believe belongs to me, she just as strongly believes belongs to *us*.

Things belonging to a person or even to two people at the same time, that is pretty easy for us to grasp and understand. Our cars belong to us, houses, tubes of toothpaste. They are ours. They belong to us.

We also have a sense of individual people belonging to a larger organization. We, for instance, belong to this church. Some of you belong to the Lion's Club. Some of you belong to a political party. Others of you belong to an alumni group. This type of belonging—membership in a group--has declined for the last several decades, but we still know what it means and how it feels.

Belonging to a person is different. The only frame of reference we have for someone belonging to someone else is our country's history of enslavement. One person owned others, and those other people were said to belong to the enslaver, to be the owner's property or possession, as if they were clothes in the closet. That is painful and shameful, and so we avoid thinking about it, avoid thinking about people belonging to other people.

But there is a kind of belonging, a kind of belonging that Paul is talking about, where people belong to each other. It's a *mutual* belonging—a communal belonging, rather than an individual possessing or being possessed. And those

people who belong to each other as a community, also belong to Christ. And Christ belongs to God, therefore the community of people also belong to God.

We're working our way backwards in this passage, and I'm doing my best to make it less abstract and fuzzy than last week's sermon, but I'm not sure I'm going to manage that. At the end of the chapter, Paul says don't boast about human leaders. He's back on the topic he introduced in chapter 1, the divisions among the Corinthian Christians. You don't belong to Apollos or Paul or Cephas, he reminds them again. Don't brag about being a part of a faction. All things are yours (and that's plural): Apollos and Cephas and Paul, the world, life or death or things present or things to come. All belong to you. Which doesn't ring true or make sense, because control over life and death and things present and future don't belong to humans at all. It doesn't ring true until the next phrase. All of those things belong to you because you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

The church is encompassed by Christ, and Christ is encompassed by God. We are the church. And so we also belong to Christ. We also belong to each other. We hold responsibility of taking care of each other, and loving each other.

So the church belongs to God. God holds the church. But the church also holds God. How is that? Backing up now to verse 16. You (plural) are God's temple. God's Spirit dwells in you. The Temple in Jerusalem was understood to be God's dwelling place. God was present everywhere, but God's home was in the Temple. So to call the church—not a building, but people—to call the church God's Temple was quite a claim. In the people of the church, that's where God's home is. In these imperfect, squabbling, factionalized, people, that's where God can be found. God, in a sense, belongs to these people, to this church. Not to say that God doesn't belong to other churches, or that God is absent everywhere else—not at all. But God belongs to these people, as these people belong to God. Not the same way, a different way, but the belonging is intertwined. That outfit can belong to two kids, and God can be home among two churches. God belongs to the whole church. And the whole church belongs to God.

Backing up some more, to verse 9. Paul says we—meaning he and Apollos and Cephas—are God's servants. You (plural) are God's field. You are God's building. The church is the field of God, where God is at work, where God is present. The church is the building of God, where Christ is the foundation, and where God is placing each person in just the right spot. God is at work. God is at work building the church, which is God's Temple, where God dwells.

So God belongs to the church, and the church belongs to God. That doesn't

seem like such a brilliant conclusion, after all. Of course God belongs to the church, and of course the church belongs to God.

But that doesn't mean it's simple or easy to work out. It's so tempting to want the church to be ours, to belong to us. The Corinthians had that temptation, too. This is Paul's church or Apollos's church or Cephas's church. Nope. It's God's church, Christ's church. It's tempting, too, to say that we aren't worthy to be God's dwelling place, the Temple of God. Of course we aren't. Neither were the Corinthians. God chose the church, God built and is building the church into a dwelling place that will belong to God, and already does. We belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. And we are God's temple, in which God's Spirit dwells. That is true in the present, and true in the future as God continues to work within us.