

New Beginnings: Belonging
Isaiah 6:1-8
Romans 8:12-17

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
May 31, 2015

In Disney's animated movie "Toy Story," a plush toy cowboy named Woody confronts a toy astronaut named Buzz Lightyear with the fact that Buzz is only an action figure and not really a space hero. Early in the movie Woody shouts, "You're not a space ranger! You're an action figure—a child's plaything."

Only after failing to fly, Buzz realizes the truth of Woody's statement. Grief-stricken and disillusioned, Buzz hangs his head in resignation, declaring, "I'm just a stupid, little, insignificant toy."

Woody later seeks to comfort his friend by underscoring the love of the boy who owns them both. "You must not be thinking clearly. Look, over in that house, there's a kid who thinks you're the greatest, and it's not because you're a space ranger; it's because you're his."

As Buzz lifts his foot, he sees a label affixed to the bottom of his little shoe. There in black permanent ink is the name of the little boy to whom he belongs. Seeing the image of his owner, Buzz breaks into a smile and takes on a new determination.

In today's reading from Romans chapter 8, Paul helps his readers in the early church toward a similar realization. You are not stupid, little insignificant nothings. There's a God out there who thinks you're "the greatest"... because you're *his*. That's what the enigmatic phrase "spirit of adoption" means in Paul's letter. "You did not receive a spirit of slavery," Paul writes, but rather a "spirit of adoption." (Romans 8:15) This means you get to call God "Abba, Father," and this means you've been spliced into "the family of God," so consider yourself an heir to the "family fortune" which means you'll be obliged to work in the "family business".

I remember one day my two sisters and I all happened to be around my parents' house for some reason—maybe it was right after Christmas or something—I don't remember why we were all three there, but I remember my mother mysteriously ushered us into the living room and rather ceremonially sat us down on the living room sofa.

"Since you're all here at once," she said, "I thought this would be a good time to divvy out the family jewels."

"The family jewels...?" we said, darting glances at each other and then back over at our mom. Up until that particular moment in time we knew nothing of any such family jewels, but—hey—if this was distribution day, we were in! We each sat up straighter on the sofa.

Our mom reached into a canvas bag that we hadn't noticed next to her on the floor and pulled out...an old cigar box. "I suggest you each taking turns choosing one item at a time," she said, and with a deadpan poker face she slowly opened the lid of the cigar box, and then brought it over to the sofa for us to have a closer look.

The so-called "family jewels" consisted of a cigar box full of the shiniest, gaudiest, sparkliest costume jewelry you've ever seen—every piece of it worth absolutely nothing! But what fun we had taking turns picking out "our share" of the treasure trove.

In Jesus Christ, God is pleased to divvy out the family fortune equally to all who call him Lord. William Loader writes: "The inheritance is not a place or a gift or a reward, but God and God's glory. God's glory is not golden shiny streets, but God's own being. The glow and glory of God...."¹

If God were to sit us all down together in the living room, the cigar box on God's lap that God might pass around the room would be filled with nothing but radiance. Each one take some. God makes us "joint heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17) of this radiant treasure emptied as it were into our cupped hands if we are willing to receive it and if we are willing to accept the rights and responsibilities that come with it.

The Heidelberg Catechism dating back to 1563 begins with this question: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

The answer goes like this, "That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ... He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."²

In 1998, our PC(USA) denomination took on the task of writing a children's catechism to be a teaching tool and it begins exactly as the Heidelberg Catechism begins, with the theme of belonging.

Here are the first few questions³:

Who are you?

I am a child of God.

What does it mean to be a child of God?

That I belong to God, who loves me.

What makes you a child of God?

Grace -- God's free gift of love that I do not deserve and cannot earn.

Don't you have to be good for God to love you?

No. God loves me in spite of all I do wrong.

How do you thank God for this gift of love?

I promise to love and trust God with all my heart.

How do you love God?

By worshipping God, by loving others, and by respecting what God has created.

I specifically chose the subject of “belonging” for particular emphasis during our church’s New Beginnings discernment process for two reasons. The first reason is that I believe—and our catechisms teach—that this is a core theological claim of the church and of our Bibles. How would our lives be different if we woke up every morning and before doing or saying anything else, we simply announced to the air around us: “I belong to God in Jesus Christ.” What if we repeated that claim throughout the day: “because I belong to God in Jesus Christ...” or, “even so, I belong to God in Jesus Christ,”

Contemporary church historian Diana Butler Bass describes the shifting patterns of belief, behavior and belonging in the church vis-a-vis the culture over the past 50 or so years and she concludes that: 1) religious belief is changing, 2) religious behavior is in flux and 3) people’s sense of belonging to a particular faith is increasingly unstable.

That affects us, because we preach belonging and we want people to make the connection between belonging to God and belonging to a church, but they don’t. This isn’t our fault. It’s not because we’re doing what we do badly. It’s a trend. It’s hard to go up against a trend.

Even so, Diana Butler Bass says that churches with a clear identity are doing better than those with a fuzzy identity. It’s important for a church to ask itself over and over again, “who are we in God?” and get clear about an answer to that question. She writes,

The biblical query “Who am I in God” is a starting point of Christian spirituality. Why do Christians pray? Christians do not pray to have wishes granted; rather, Christians pray to find themselves in God and that they might be more aware of their motives and actions.

Why do Christians worship? Christians do not worship to be entertained; rather, Christians listen to sermons, sing and partake of bread and wine in community to be IN Jesus’s presence and come to know themselves better.

Why do Christians serve others? Christians do not act charitably to earn heaven credit; rather, Christians find Jesus IN their neighbors and such proximity enables grater insight to life fully in the world. Christians practice asking Jesus IN their lives because when they find themselves IN God, pretense slips away to reveal the truest dimensions of selfhood and gives individuals the power to act in transforming ways.⁴

New Beginnings is helping us get clear about our identity. It is helping us to say who we are IN God (and therefore also know who we are not). And it is helping us observe and name what is going on in the world around us that makes our work now different from what our work was 20 and 40 and 50 years ago.

Diana Butler Bass was the keynote speaker at the NEXT Church Conference that I attended in March and I am still digesting and pondering her message. I bought all of her books at the conference bookstore and I have been reading them when I can.

She has paid special attention in her work to the time periods in American religious history known as the Great Awakenings. There have been three Great Awakenings in American history, defined as “movements of cultural revitalization” that lead to “basic restructurings of our institutions and redefinitions of our social goals.”

“Awakenings begin when old systems break down,” she writes. They begin with a “critical disjunction” in how we perceive ourselves, God and the world.... The end of the old opens the way for the new.”⁵

There have been three Great Awakenings in the history of our country. The first was from 1730-1760, the second 1800-1830, and the third 1890-1920. “During each period old patterns of religious life gave way to new ones and eventually spawned new forms of organization and institutions that revitalized national life.”⁶

To make a long story short, and maybe you’ve guessed where this is going, she postulates (and several other contemporary church historians agree) that we are in now in the middle of a fourth Great Awakening in this country. There are five stages of a Great Awakening⁷.

Stage 1 is a “crisis of legitimacy.” Large numbers of people—not just a smattering of individuals—but vast portions of the population begin to question conventional doctrines, practices and their sense of identity or belonging.

During Stage 2, people experience cultural distortion. They interpret the crisis they are feeling as an institutional problem and not as a personal failure on their part. Something larger is amiss that needs to be reset.

In Stage 3, a significant number of individuals or groups begin to articulate a new vision, a new understanding of human nature, a new understanding of how God is relating to us, and new ways of organizing ourselves to put these new understandings into the form of new practices.

As a new vision unfolds, during Stage 4, small groups of people begin to follow new paths, experiment, and innovate.

Stage 5, the last stage, brings institutional transformation. The innovators start to win over everybody else. The undecideds flip, and the result is profound transformation.

Diana Butler Bass argues that starting in the 1960s in this country we have been experiencing the first and second stages a Great Awakening: the 1) crisis of legitimacy and 2) cultural distortion. New visions are emerging and some new practices are

emerging. But this fourth Great Awakening is larger and slower and significantly different from the other three because for the first time we have had to take other religious faiths and practices into theological consideration because we all have so many friends and neighbors who believe, behave and belong differently.

What does it mean to belong to God in Christ Jesus—as the Heidelberg Catechism states— when so many of our neighbors understand God differently and practice religious faith differently?

As we look at trends in church membership generally speaking and at the charts and graphs that illustrate our decline here at the Church on the Green, I think it's helpful to understand our historical context. ***We're doing ministry in a sociological hurricane. Category 5.*** If you think about it that way, you realize what an amazing job we ARE doing. If you think about it that way, you can't help but feel proud.

Moving forward, we can—and we must—continue to offer a clear and compelling witness to God's good news in Jesus Christ in healthy open dialogue with all who beg to differ. We are not—in the words of Buzz Lightyear to his plush toy cowboy friend Woody—“stupid, little, or insignificant”. We are adopted members of the family, inheritors of the family jewels, obliged therefore to work in the family business of bringing the love, joy and peace of God through Christ to a hurting world while a sociological hurricane rages all around us.

So hang on to the sturdy timbers everyone. This is what transformation feels like from the inside out. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not be afraid.

Because...How strong is the Lord? The children helped us to answer that question in the words of Psalm 29:

*The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.
May the Lord give strength to his people!
May the Lord bless his people with peace!*

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling

¹Loader, William. “Pentecost.” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/CEpPentecost.htm>

²Heidelberg Catechism, PC(USA) Book of Confessions, Louisville, KY: 2007, p. 29

³“Belonging to God: A First Catechism,” Presbyterian Church (USA), <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/belonging-god-first-catechism-biblical-references/>

⁴Butler Bass, Diana. Christianity After Religion, HarperCollins: New York, 2012, p. 187

⁵Butler Bass, Christianity After Religion, p. 29

⁶Butler Bass, Christianity After Religion, p. 29

⁷Butler Bass, Christianity After Religion, p. 33-34