



When I was in seminary Nancy and I realized one day that we were probably going to be worshiping in Lutheran Churches for the rest of our lives and so we decided to attend worship in different churches while we could. One of the most memorable was a church in South Chicago. I was probably 25 years old and it was the very first time I'd been in a place in which I was the only white person in worship. While I had dressed in business casual, every male in the church was in shirt and tie. And while Nancy had worn a dress, most of the women wore what looked like white nursing uniforms. The worship service itself was unlike anything I had ever experienced, not least because it lasted well over two hours.

Nancy and I didn't know the hymns. We didn't know when to stand up and when to sit down. And we had no idea that we were supposed to shout "Amen" and "Preach it brother" throughout the pastor's sermon. It all seemed so alien to us. But when the service was over we were overwhelmed by the number of people who sought us out to welcome us and let us know how glad they were that we had come. More than once we were urged to come home with people to join them for lunch. It was amazing. [USING THREE BIG BOXES WITH THE WORDS "BELIEVE, BEHAVE, BELONG" ON THEM] We didn't behave like the members of that church. And we didn't believe all that they believed. But rarely have I been made to feel that I belonged despite it all.

Compare that experience to this one. Years ago when I was serving a church in Illinois a waitress at one of my favorite lunch spots asked if I might be willing to baptize her granddaughter because no one in her family attended a church. "I haven't been able to step into a church since I was 17," she said. When I asked why she told me the following story.

She grew up in the church but had become a rebel as a teenager and had gotten pregnant. One Sunday morning in the middle of the worship service the pastor made her stand up in front of the entire congregation, told everyone what a sinner she was and that she was no longer welcome in their fellowship, and

had the ushers escort her out of the church. She hasn't been back to a church since, and I really can't blame her.

Have you ever been in a situation in you had to believe and behave - to think like others and act like others - before you could belong. In today's scripture reading we're going to see the early church struggling with these three dynamics – believe, behave, belong - and we're going to be challenged to get them in the right order right here at Prince of Peace. Let's read Galatian 2:11-16 together [NLT].

Let me explain what's going on in section of scripture. At the heart this story is a question that plagued the early Church, "Did non-Jews who put their faith in Jesus have to obey the Jewish law in order to be accepted into the fellowship of the church? In particular, did the males have to be circumcised?" Some said, "Absolutely! If you don't obey the law you're not right with God and you're not right with God's people. Such people can't belong to the faith community." But people like Paul thought differently. Paul believed that Jesus made all people right with God, not the law, and so all were welcome in the faith community, whether circumcised or not. And then there's Peter, who is a classic "waffler". Peter had been sharing meals with uncircumcised Christ-followers for a while, which was against the Jewish law. But all that changed when a group of Jewish converts who insisted upon obedience to the law showed up. Then Peter the waffler distanced himself from those uncircumcised believers. Paul immediately called him out on his hypocrisy and called him to follow the way of Jesus. Let me explain it this way.

[Set up boxes in the order BELIEVE, BEHAVE, BELONG] The way of the law basically said that if you believe what we believe, and if you behave the way you're supposed to, you can belong. But Jesus showed his followers a very different way.

[Set up boxes in the order BELONG, BELIEVE, BEHAVE] Think about how Jesus interacted with people. He welcomed sinners and outsiders into his life. He ate with them, healed them and loved them just as they were. And because he loved and welcomed them just as they were, they began to believe that God could love them and forgive them too, and that began to heal them, so that in time they began to behave differently.

In today's scripture reading Paul is insisting that the Church following the way of Jesus – that we love people just as they are, letting them know that they belong. Safe in that love and acceptance people often come to believe that God's love and forgiveness is for them. And that begins to change how they behave, how they live. I cannot overstate how important this is, how powerful it is, and how dangerous when we get it wrong. In the first congregation I served there was a young woman who got caught up in a life of drugs and prostitution. By the grace of God she got the help she needed to turn her life around. And one Sunday morning she decided to come back

to church. I can't imagine how difficult that decision was for her, knowing that many people in the congregation knew her story. And when she came to church that morning she wore clothing that mirrored her former lifestyle – a short skirt, tube top and spiked heels. I'll never forget how people avoided her that morning, nor will I forget the pain of hearing a group of "faithful members" gossiping about her, talking about how shameful it was for a young woman to come to church dressed like that. I don't ever remember seeing that young woman in church again, perhaps because she was told without words that she had to behave and believe before she could belong.

This is how we were welcomed into the family of God. By grace, through our baptism, we were washed, blessed and embraced. Long before we believed anything, and long before we knew how to behave God proclaimed, "I love you. You belong to me." And through the nurturing of the faith community we came to know the love and forgiveness of Jesus, compelling us to believe the Good News. And that Good News heals us and guides us to behave in ways that express our love for our neighbor. With Jesus it has always been belong, believe, behave.

The question is, how will it be for us? [Begin to show pictures of people who don't look like us...different races, people with tatoos, kids dressed casually, etc] Before too long we're going to have a new front door. And through that door will come people who don't look like us, act like us or believe like us. Will we welcome them? Will we convey to them the very same welcome that Jesus has given us? Or will we communicate through our words and actions that they don't belong because they don't believe or behave as we do? And that's not just a question for the Church as a whole, but for each of us as individuals. What's the order of your boxes? Be honest. What might need to be rearranged in your heart in order to reflect the way of Jesus – the way of love and welcome? Let's pray right now that God would rearrange our hearts to keep this [point to the boxes] in the right order.