"Belonging"
John 18:33-37
November 25, 2018
Christ the King
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

When she was about seven years old, our daughter Annie decided to run away from home. I don't remember why. I'm sure it was one of the great hardships she had to endure as a child—speaking kindly to her brother, cleaning her room, going to bed at a decent hour, something like that—but there was some offence of her mother and I that was the last straw and she angrily announced that she was going to run away from home. Of course she ran upstairs to her room, and started packing all her most important items into her Little Mermaid backpack. I followed her to her room and tried to do the good parent thing, calmly asking her where she was going, how she was going to get food, reminding her that night was not too far away, doing my best logical dissuasion of this running away plan. And of course since logic and planning work so poorly with irate seven-year-olds, all I got in return was angry stares and exclamations of "I don't care!" At that point, Molly, the family dog wandered into the room. Annie took one look at her, dropped her backpack and threw her arms around Molly and said, "But, Oh Molly, I could never leave you!"

Somehow, in that one moment, Annie realized that leaving home meant more that just freedom from Mom and Dad's rules. It meant leaving the dog. It meant leaving each other. I've heard that for many years, the prevailing wisdom offered by specialists recommended that parents and caregivers engage in conversation with children, acknowledge their frustrations and then discuss with them logically where they would go and how they would live, eventually convincing the children that running away is a bad idea. This advice, while certainly reasonable, has given way lately to an alternative response. Now it is recommended that parents and caregivers simply tell the children, "No," explaining that they may not run away because "we belong to one another" and that when persons belong to one antoher, even when they are frustrated and upset, they stay with one another.[1]

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1 Nishioka, Rodger. *Feasting on the Word.* Year B, volume 4, p. 332.

When Jesus meets with Pilate before his crucifixion, the question comes up of belonging. That's what all the questions about kingship are about, they are really about belonging. Pilate first asks the question, "Are you the king of the Jews?" as a question to trap Jesus. There's no good answer to this question. If Jesus says, no he is not, then he will admit he has no authority and the people would not follow him. If he says, yes he is, then he has made himself an enemy of Caesar and a threat to the Romans. He will either incur the anger of the crowds or of the Romans. It's a no-win situation. So Jesus answers with another quesiton: "Is this your question or did you hear about me from others?" The ball is back in Pilate's court, but the question quickly becomes what kind of a king is Jesus. Is he a threat to Rome? If he is a king of the Jewish nation, then he is a threat to Roman authority. But it becomes clear that the kingdom of Jesus is not a political one but a theological one. Jesus says that he is king of those who hear his voice, of those who belong to the truth.

When we seek the truth, when we seek God who is truth then we belong to the kingdom of God and Jesus is our king. This may have practical dimensions, but it is not a political realm. It is a matter of to whom we ultimately belong. Children grow up and as they do they test their belonging to their families. We do that with other belongings as well. We test our belonging to our communities of faith. It is obvious that we have people come and go from congregations, many because they move or their circumstances change. But have you ever thought about whether you belong here or not? Or whether you belong in the Presbyterian church or not? Rodger Nishioka, the Presbyterian educator comments that "unlike children, many adults have the ability to leave relationships, and some do—for a few hours to calm nerves, for a few days to ponder the durability of their relationships. Some eventually leave permanently. Communities of faith are no different. Some persons test their belonging by delivering ultimatiums. Some persons test their belonging by simply drifting away quietly, wondering if anyone will notice. Others take time to engage in thoughtful conversation with the community's leadership and then, through measured prayer and discernment, decide whether to stay or leave."

There might be things or people that would make you leave our congregation, there might be changes

in your life that would cause you to leave. If that ever happens, I hope it is with prayer and converstaion and discernment. Too many churches split up over personalities and emotional issues, not really remembering that our commitment as a church is more than just to a particular group of people. But we test it from time to time, don't we? What will we do if the church takes this social position or that? What will we do if we start doing more of that kind of music? What will we do if the preacher starts preaching about those issues? What is it that tests our belonging to the church?

We even test at times our belonging to the nation. Have you ever wondered about giving up your citizenship? Some people here in our church, even close friends of mine have occasionally described my political leanings as "wildly liberal." So not true. Actually, I'm just sort of liberal. I can say that because, have you met my mother? She is wildly liberal. Many of you know that my mother was raised in the suburbs of Lansing. But her mother was Canadian, and after her children were grown, my grandmother moved back to Canada, having never become an American citizen. The fact that her mother lived in Canada always seemed to give my mother an out. More than once as a boy I remember her saying, "If such and such a person is elected, I may just move to Canada and become Canadian like my mother." Is there anything that would make you think that? Could you ever conceive of giving up your American citizenship and going somewhere else, or do you belong here?

As Americans we test all of these things on the basis of our individual choice. We choose a family through marriage and how we build a family and a home. We choose a church and a faith community on how it fits us at that time in our lives. We even choose to belong to a nation by our participation in our national life. But those are very American ways of looking at things. Much of the rest of the world is, and certainly in Jesus time was, group oriented. The questions of belonging were not questions that the individual would ask him or herself. How does this decision affect the community? What do other think? What best keeps us together? New Testament scholar Bruce Malina explains that in the wold of the New Testament, a peson did not think of himself or herself as an individual who acts alone, regardless of what other think and say. Rather, the person is "ever aware of the expectations of others,

especially significant others, and strives to match those expectations. This is the group-embedded, group-oriented, collectivistic personality, one who need another simple to to know who he or she is."[2] Since the time of King David and before, Israel had seen themselves as a group, as a kingdom, and in a way David brought them together as they never had been before, so they still looked to David as their example and the coming Messiah was coming as the Son of David.

We are brought together by the kingship of Jesus. He chose us. The kingdom is present wherever he is present. We belong to him. And because we do, then by extension we belong to each other. Jesus tells Pilate that his is a different kind of kingdom, not like this world knows. People may come and go from this fellowship, but we still belong to each other. When we proclaimed in our baptism that we accepted Jesus as our Lord, as our King, we also said that in our baptism we were joined to each other and to Christ's ministry of love and peace and justice. There's no moving away from that. We were marked in our baptism and we proclaimed that "we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." We belong to him. And we belong to each other. It was he that chose us. We heard his voice. And we are his.

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2 Malina, Bruce J. *The New Testament World,* p. 74