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19th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“All Things New”

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Revelation 21:1-5

This is the Word of the Lord Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.'

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'

All Things New

After thirteen years of training and preparation, astronaut Michael Massimino was in space for the first time. He had left the safety of the shuttle to go out to the Hubble telescope and repair an instrument that had failed. There was no easy way to repair this instrument because of an access panel attached with 117 small screws. When it was built, the engineers thought they would never actually need to open this panel, so they had put glue on the screw threads. But the instrument behind the panel had broken, and for the last five years, Massimino and his colleagues had designed over a hundred new space tools that would allow them to get the screws out and the panel off so they could repair the instrument.

Massimino had spent countless nights and weekends practicing with the space tools in a simulator. And finally, the day he had practiced for was here. Out in space, attached to the shuttle by nothing more than a tether, Massimino started to remove a handrail blocking the access panel. Three out of the four screws holding the rail in place came off easily, but after working for a moment on the fourth, Massimino realized it was stripped. It wasn't going to come out, which meant the handrail wasn't coming off, which meant he couldn't get to the access panel and the 117 screws, he'd worked for five years to figure out how to remove. Which meant he couldn't repair the instrument, which meant all those NASA scientists wouldn't be able to find out whether there was life on other planets. And it was all his fault.

Massimino looked at the astronaut next to him. But he was just a rookie, there to hold the tools; he didn't know what to do. Then he looked over at the shuttle, where his five crewmates waited, but none of them had spacesuits so they couldn't help him. Then he looked down at the earth, 350 miles away and thought, there are billions of people down there, but not one of them can help me. Remembering that moment later, Massimino said, "I felt this deep loneliness. It wasn't just a Saturday-afternoon-with-a-book-alone. I felt utterly detached from the earth. I was by myself and everything I knew and loved...was far away."¹

For the last few weeks, we have been thinking theologically about loneliness and belonging. We have recognized both are fundamental to the human experience

¹ <https://themoth.org/stories/a-view-of-the-earth>

and that, while at times, they are imposed upon us by circumstances beyond our control, sometimes we seek out opportunities either to be alone or to cultivate a sense of belonging with others.

But a question we have yet to ponder is this: what role do we play in evoking feelings of loneliness and belonging in those around us, and what role does God call us to play?

In her most recent book, Brené Brown describes moving to a new school in Houston near the end of 8th grade just in time to try out for the high school drill team, the Bearkadettes. She writes,

This was to be my everything.

In a house that was increasingly filled with the muffled sound of my parents arguing... that drill team was my salvation.

Just picture it: lines of girls in white-fringed blue satin vests and short skirts,

all of them wearing uniform wigs, white cowboy boots,

small white cowboy hats and bright red lipstick,

strutting into high school football stadiums filled with crowds

afraid to leave their seats during halftime lest they miss

the high kicks and perfectly choreographed routines...

to this day, I'm not sure I've ever wanted anything in my life

more than I wanted a place on that drill team...

the perfection, precision, and beauty of it would not only

offset the growing turmoil at home,

but also deliver the holy grail of belonging. ...

I would be a part of something that literally did everything in lockstep.

A Bearkadette was belonging personified.

The day of tryouts arrived. When she got out of the car to head into the school building, she discovered every other girl was made up and dressed from head to toe in blue and gold, the school colors. Brené had on no makeup and was wearing gray cotton shorts over a black leotard. Still, she knew the routine and knew it well. Before leaving on a family trip, her parents swung by the school so she could check the listing to see who had been selected. Her name was not on the list. She was crushed. But what happened next made her feel even worse. She writes,

I walked back to our station wagon and got in the back seat,

and my dad drove away. My parents didn't say one word.

Not a single word.

The silence cut into me like a knife to the heart. They were ashamed of me and for me.

My dad had been captain of the football team.

My mom had been head of her drill team. I was nothing.

My parents, especially my father, valued being cool and fitting in above all else. I was not cool. I didn't fit in.

And now, for the first time, I didn't belong to my family either.²

It is all too easy for us to cause others that pain. It is all too easy for us to exacerbate people's loneliness. Sometimes we do it because their pain is our pain, and we can't bear to look at it too closely, so we push it and them away. But sometimes it's because we have discovered a sense of belonging, and we want to protect it at all costs.

In our first sermon in this series, we looked at one of the first stories in Genesis, when God creates two human creatures after determining it was not good for the one earth creature to be alone.

Today, we turn to the end of the Bible to hear a vision of humanity and the world redeemed, a vision of a place where everyone belongs and no one suffers the shame and pain of loneliness.

As we look at this text is important that we acknowledge that, although we may love this vision of a new heaven and a new earth, a place where God dwells with us and where there is no more suffering or pain, this vision is quite a contrast to what has come before.

Much of the book of Revelation is *not* a book about belonging, but about judgement, about a time when God will decide who is in and who is out. Of course, those parts of Revelation should feel familiar, because we are really, really good at casting judgment and deciding who belongs and who doesn't. And once we've decided that, we aren't really interested in any information that suggests we might have gotten it wrong.

² Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*. I read this illustration in Amy Miracle's sermon, "High Lonesome," preached at Broad Street Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio on September 16, 2018. Amy and I collaborated on this sermon series.

We've seen this play out over the last couple of weeks since Christine Blasey Ford accused Brett Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her in high school. For the most part, people have firmly chosen which side to belong to: either she's telling the truth, and he isn't qualified to sit on the Supreme Court, or he's telling the truth, and these false accusations are ruining his life and robbing him of what he deserves.

In the last few days, there have been a lot of words spoken and written on this topic. But the words I heard that resonated most deeply with me came from an op-ed by Frank Bruni, who criticized "the caricatures that have come to dominate the discussion." He writes, "Those caricatures are out of sync with life. And no set of character witnesses...is the final, irrefutable word. They caught a few scenes... They didn't see the whole messy movie." He goes on, "We show different colors at different times in different situations. We age, sometimes in ways that make us better, sometimes in ways that make us worse. We fashion ourselves, with or without cunning, into who and what we need to be for friends, lovers, parents, children, bosses, and employees based on their diverse expectations and ever-shifting demands. "We are genuinely saints, and we are genuinely sinners. We are pieces that add up to an *incoherent* whole."³

The vision at the end of Revelation is a vision of a city, a community of people living together with forbearance and without suffering or pain – because God dwells in their midst. This vision is so powerful because we know, we know – we are all saints and we are all sinners. We've all done things that should consign us to being left behind and left out, and we've all done things that should earn us the privilege of belonging to this new city. There is, quite simply, nothing we have done or left undone that God doesn't already know. But in this vision of a new heaven and new earth, we discover that when God makes all things new, God redeems the whole sorry story, both the tears we've shed and the tears we've caused. It all belongs. God knows it all, sees it all, honors and forgives it all. Everything and everyone belongs. This is indeed a new heaven and a new earth when we can see the big picture and include within the frame everyone and everything.

³ Frank Bruni, "The Many Faces of Brett Kavanaugh." *The New York Times*. September 25, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/25/opinion/the-many-faces-of-brett-kavanaugh.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

But right now, this new creation sure seems a long way off from our current reality.

Speaking of a long way off, back up in space, Massimino was still trying to figure out how to get that darn handrail off so he could get to the access panel and he was stuck until he got a call from ground control with a new idea. And lo and behold, the idea worked! He got the handrail off, got to the access panel with all those screws, got the screws out, put in a new power supply, and got the instrument working again.

A few days later he returned to earth. Driving home to his house, with his wife and his kids, his wife told him that when he was out on that eight-hour spacewalk to repair the telescope, she had been watching the NASA television channel. She said she could tell how sad he felt when he thought he wasn't going to be able to make the repair. She could hear it in his voice as he talked to ground control and she had never heard him sound so sad. And he realized that at the very moment he felt most alone, his wife was thinking about him. Just then they turned onto his street, and he saw the whole block decorated with American flags. He saw neighbors waiting for him, and when he got out of the car, they greeted him and hugged him and told him how proud they were and how they had been thinking of him the whole time he was in space.

The next day at the return ceremony he learned that while he was up there feeling utterly alone, the engineers and scientists at ground control were running around doing everything they could to solve his problem, including contacting a space center in Maryland that pulled together a team on a Sunday and eventually came up with the solution. And he realized that at the time he felt most lonely, detached entirely from everyone on earth, he wasn't alone at all his family and friends, people he worked with, people he loved, people who loved and cared about him, were with him every step of the way.⁴

Friends, we are living through a difficult moment in our country. We are painfully, undeniably, divided: Democrats from Republicans, men from women, young from old, black from white, rich from poor. At moments like these, it is so tempting to create spaces where we feel a sense of belonging and then to protect those spaces with everything we've got – to make sure no one gets in who might

⁴ <https://themoth.org/stories/a-view-of-the-earth>

challenge us or make us uncomfortable. When we shut people out of the spaces we find a sense of belonging, when we only fill those spaces with people like us, we make the whole situation worse. We become like Michael Massimino, out there in the inky black, cold darkness of outer space, staring at a problem he doesn't know how to fix, convinced that he is utterly on his own to fix it when in fact. Everyone he knows and loves is rooting for him, and not only rooting for him but working frantically to help solve the problem.

We are NOT alone. Our situation as difficult as it is NOT hopeless. God, the God who created us and loves us and redeems us saints and sinners that we all are – is working, night and day on our behalf, to fashion a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, and God calls us to join this work, by drawing the circle of belonging bigger and bigger.

God's new heaven and new earth is the place where we can begin to acknowledge and heal the hurt and pain we've suffered and the hurt and pain we've caused. It's a place where we can know the joy of forgiving and being forgiven, a place where we can know God's presence with us in every moment. It is a place where all things the joy, the hurt, the pain can be made new. Any this new city God promises us and invites us to co-create is indeed a new heaven and a new earth where everything and everyone Every. Single. One. belongs. May it be so.

Amen