

“We Belong to God”
A Sermon by Angie Witmer based on John 12:20-33
Saturday/Sunday, March 28/29, 2009
Plymouth UCC

(an excerpt of the text):

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

When we are living, we are in the Lord. When we are dying, we are in the Lord.

For in our living and in our dying. We belong to God, we belong to God.

(Pues Si Vivimos/When We Are Living—traditional Mexican folk song)

We belong to God.

That's it. That is pretty much Jesus' whole message. We belong to God. All of us. He taught it. He preached it. He lived it—he invited *everyone* to hang out with him. Everyone. Didn't matter if you were the best or the brightest or the fastest or the richest . You could be. But you didn't have to be. Young and old and everyone in between. Men and women alike, too. It was that way from the very beginning—in the first chapter of John, Jesus' invitation was simply to 'come and see' and 'follow'. And people did. They came. And they saw. And they were changed somehow.

So they invited others to come and see. And those people started to follow. And they were changed somehow, too. So they invited more people to come and see and those people started to follow...and pretty soon Jesus had himself a bunch of disciples who all got the same message over and over and over again: you belong to God.

YOU belong to God.

This book is full of stories of men and woman and children who heard that message loud and clear and chose to follow: their lives were restored. They were healed. They were even resurrected.

But that's not all that's in this book—there are also plenty of stories here of people who heard Jesus' message and chose not to follow. Regular people. Holy people. Important people. Everyday people. Broken people who, for one reason or another, chose to stay that way.

And in the days and weeks to come, as the struggle between life and death unfolds, these two responses to Jesus' message will collide—and it's not going to be pretty. These are critical times and Jesus knows it—he is fully aware that there are angry people who will stop at nothing to shut him up but he just keeps right on going, sharing that one simple message with pretty much everyone he meets:

You belong to God.

At the beginning of this part of the story from John, Jesus and his disciples and hundreds of thousands of other people are in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover—that big Jewish holiday where everybody gets together to remember who they are and to whom they belong. It seems that word has gotten out about Jesus and what he's been up to, as there are some Greeks who want to check it out—check him out—and see if it's true. If he's for real.

So they find Philip—one of Jesus' disciples—and ask if they can see Jesus. Philip takes their request to Andrew and the two of them take the request to Jesus. Now, Jesus could have responded to the request in a number of ways. He could have: 1). Ignored the request and gone about his business or he could have 2). Signed an autograph and hurried along his way or he could 3). Use this opportunity to reach out to the Greeks—the outsiders, the foreigners—and drive his message home once again.

Not wanting to give up a perfect opportunity to share his message with these folks—and anyone else who might be standing around—Jesus chose Option #3, even though the first two options would have been a little safer. After all, people were gunning for him. Why throw fuel on the fire?

Well...why not. Jesus knows his hour has come. He says so right here. It's time to really get serious. Ratchet everything up a notch. And if things really are going to happen the way he thinks they are

going to happen, it's time to start thinking about pass the baton off—he's better make it perfectly clear what it is it means to belong to God. He's not going to be around much longer.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain...but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love life will lose it—those who hate life get to keep it.”

In other words, Jesus says, this isn't all about me. My time here is about up—they are going to do whatever they can to get rid of me. But this isn't done—it's up to you now. Follow me. Serve. Work. Heal. And don't forget: you belong to God.

The cool thing: Jesus really meant it. These weren't just words to make people feel good about themselves. He honestly wanted everyone to have what had: a full, whole life. The whole Jesus movement was never about having thousands of adoring fans, name recognition or rock star status. It was always about building relationships and inviting others into the fullness of life. Big difference.

Another cool thing: that message (you belong to God) and the invitation to follow hasn't changed at all in the past two thousand years. Not at all. Which is why we still say it. And mean it. You are welcome here. All of you. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey...

You. Belong. To God.

You is a deceptive word. Jesus meant “you” of course: you and all of your quirks and gifts and odd habits and talents. But he didn't mean it just in the singular, “I'm-going-to-single-you-out-because-you've-earned-it” kind of way. Not at all. He meant it in a more broad kind of way. A better translation of the Greek here would be “ya'll”. As in “ya'll come”. Rich, poor, male, female, young, old and everyone in between. Ya'll.

It was true then and it's true now. “Ya'll come” because...

Ya'll *belong*. We are all linked together. We fit in. We are all a part of this and we are accepted as is...

By God. Mother. Father. Creator of us all. The one who lives and moves within and around us and gives us life each and every day.

We belong to that God.

So here's the deal—if we really want this new life that Jesus talks about, then there are some things we need to deal with. One is our perception of ourselves. We really are good enough. As is. Deal with it.

The other thing is our perception of God. God is here. Now. Really. Pretending that God is a wacky relative that we have to visit on major holidays isn't doing any of us any good. Trying to squeeze God-time into our spare time is not exactly living an abundant life.

The hour has come, the time is at hand and we have to choose: do we try to keep a tight schedule and stick to the major holiday and every other weekend schedule with a God that we really don't know or trust? Or do we try out something else—maybe a new kind of living arrangement—and give God some more responsibility and control over what's going on with us day in and day out?

In today's scripture, Jesus words it a little differently but the choice is the same for the folks around him, too: try something new, lose yourself and follow me. The reward is greater than you could ever imagine. Or don't. Stick to what you're doing. It's all up to you.

Decisions. Decisions. We can think this thing to death, you know: look at it from all sides, sit with it for a few days or weeks or months or years as we study and theorize and intellectualize all of this stuff. We're actually pretty good at that. Sometimes I think that we believe that communities like Plymouth exist solely for our intellectual stimulation as we engage each other in serious debate over what the scriptures really say, whether they are factually or figuratively true, and what any of this could possibly mean for us thousands of years after the fact. We talk. And we talk. And we talk. And we think. And we question. And we wonder. And we hide. Hide behind the stories. Hide behind the words. Because it's so easy. There's a lot to hide behind. Lots to get lost in here. And besides—everybody does it.

That's not what Jesus had in mind. Please don't misunderstand—Jesus enjoyed a good debate as much as anybody. He welcomed questions. He appreciated talking things out and telling stories...but not at the expense of actually getting to work and being in relationship with God and one another. Jesus did not say get together and talk about me. He said, "Follow. Serve."

Do we? Or don't we? Are ya'll gonna come? Or not? Up to you. But remember: *you belong to God*.
May those words—may that message—shape your decisions each and every day. Amen.