

I Belong to...

Hespeler, January 25, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 9:1-4, Psalm 27:1, 4-9, [1 Corinthians 1:10-18](#), Matthew 4:12-23

Last week, as you know, I came to you with some pretty stunning news. Somehow, and amazingly, the Apostle Paul had reached out to us down through the centuries and, together with a guy named Sosthenes, had sent us a card to celebrate our first anniversary.

I know you were all as blown away by that as I was. I thought that it was just going to be a one-time event. I mean, surely Paul wouldn't employ his time-travelling Post Office to write to us again, would he?

Well, I'm sure you know the answer to that question because we all read it together this morning, didn't we? We continued to read through Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, and you surely noticed how directly it was addressed to us where we are today, starting the second year of our journey as a congregation together.

Problems Addressed

After his opening words of celebration for how far they have come together and encouragement for the future, Paul turns, in our reading this morning, to some of the problems and struggles that still lie before him. And he begins with the one that troubles him most – the trouble they are having being united.

A woman in the congregation, no doubt a local leader whom he greatly respects, has sent messengers to him, he says. **“For it has been made clear to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters,”** he writes.

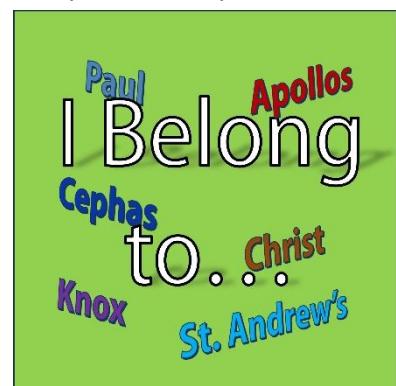
The problem, you see, is that certain things set them apart from one another. In fact, for all intents and purposes, it seems as if they all came from different churches. **“What I mean,”** Paul says, **“is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’”**

Belonging

Note the wording there. It is all about where they *belong* and to whom they belong. Belonging is one of the most essential building blocks of your identity. You primarily know who you are because you know where you belong.

Belonging is all about the places where you feel at home. It is about the people you feel like you can be yourself with. It is also about those things that you care about enough to support and defend.

That is why, whenever people talk about their identity, they speak of things like their family, their hometown, their nationality and the people they spend time with. And if a church is a strong and healthy community, people typically find a key part of their identity in their church.



Where They Find Their Identity

But these folks in Corinth, Paul tells us, are finding their identity in something other than their church. They speak of different teachers who were there at different times – Paul, Apollos and Cephas – and finding their identity in them. Now, all of these teachers, including Paul, had been there in the past. They made a big impression for a while, and then they moved on.

So, when these believers speak of “belonging” to these teachers, what they are essentially saying is that they find their Christian identity in those past eras.

In addition, some of them are saying that they belong to Christ. And that may be an attempt on their part to ground their identity in an ongoing reality as Christ continued to be with the church. But the fact that the people saying this are creating yet another faction within the church rather than bringing everyone together indicates that they are not living that identity out in helpful ways.

Quarrelling

Now, there are some ways in which I do not recognize us and our situation in this part of Paul’s letter. He speaks about people quarrelling in the church and says that this is so disturbing that Chloe has gone out of her way to bring it to his attention. Well, I am glad to say that I have not seen any of that sort of quarrel in our congregation.

Do we disagree sometimes or see things from different points of view? Absolutely. And that kind of disagreement is normal and healthy. It would actually be a bad sign if we didn’t have any of that. But where we have disagreed, we have been committed to working those matters out peaceably and in a spirit of harmony.

So, Paul wouldn’t chew us out for quarrelling. But he would be concerned about how we see ourselves and our belonging in the church. I am sure that he would appeal to us by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of us be in agreement and that there be no divisions among us, but that we be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose.

Our Belonging

So, ask yourself how you think of your belonging in the church. Because of our amalgamation, I know that it can be easy to fall into the thinking of ourselves in those terms – I belonged to Knox, I belonged to St. Andrew’s. Even more important, it is tempting to think of others in those terms – they belonged to St. Andrew’s, or they belonged to Knox.

We may also struggle to acknowledge newcomers – those who have come in the last year or so. If they don’t have that connection of belonging to the past, we may not be sure how they can belong.

I realize, of course, that that history is important and knowing where we belonged can help us understand how we react to things now. But belonging that is primarily anchored in past realities is not going to help us to embrace the identity that God is giving to us now.

And it is at this point that I think it is fitting to throw in a now famous quote from a world leader: “Nostalgia is not a strategy.” That may certainly be true in global politics right now, but it is always been true of the church.

Baptism

So, our belonging is an important part of our identity that Paul is drawing our attention to today. Immediately after discussing belonging, Paul appears to change the subject and begin talking about baptism.

"I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius," he writes, **"so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name."** And I know that it's a little bit funny that he then immediately corrects himself and admits that he did also baptize the household of Stephanas. Then ultimately, he confesses that he doesn't really remember who he baptized.

But the question is, why does that even matter? What does that have to do with their issues around identity? Well, it turns out, a whole lot. We might miss this because, as you know, it is a common practice in the Presbyterian Church to baptize people as infants. As a result of that, I imagine, many of you here today don't actually remember your baptisms.

Key Moments in Your Life

That was not the case for the church in Corinth. It was a new church, which meant that, for the great majority of them (except perhaps of some infants in the household of Stephanas), the memories of their baptisms were very fresh. They had chosen for themselves to be baptized, and it marked a very significant turning point in their lives. And those kinds of life changing experiences are generally pivotal for somebody's sense of identity.

We, as modern Christians in the Presbyterian tradition, may not have had that particular experience in the church. But we have had other similar experiences. The church has been given a great privilege in our society to be associated with so many life-changing moments.

Think of all the experiences you have had that transformed your life that were associated with the church. Your profession of faith, your wedding, the baptism of your children, the funeral of a loved one. Perhaps a clergy person or chaplain was there with you when someone you loved passed away. There is no denying how life-changing such experiences can be, and many of them happened for us within the church.

In addition, you probably have had moments, however fleeting, in the life of the church when you felt the closer presence of God or when some deep truth finally made sense to you. There have been moments of profound joy and of deep sorrow. There have been times when someone was there for you when you needed it most.

Those are all experiences that can set or change the course of our lives. As such, they really do make us who we are. And I know that many of you have had those experiences in church. I have too. And I know that they are essential to your identity.

Why Paul Is Glad Not to Baptize Them

So why, then, does Paul say that he is glad to have not been there for such pivotal moments in the lives of the people in Corinth? Is he trying to downplay the importance of such moments for their sense of identity? Of course not.

Rather, he is saying that such experiences are so important that you cannot tie them to a particular place or person. They transcend the particular circumstances that you were in when you had them. And so, you need to set them free from being tied to particular places and people.

God is not limited to particular places or people. That experience you had of God in the church or that particular commitment you made or that feeling you expressed was a gift that God gave to you to transform you. You carry that experience or that commitment with you wherever you may go.

Your baptism was not effective because it was performed by Paul. The quality of your marriage is not guaranteed because it happened in this church or that church. You did not receive comfort for your grief because of where you mourned.

All of those things changed your life because God was there for you in that moment and because God has not abandoned you since and never will. That is why Paul declares, **“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel—and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.”**

The Letter to Us Continues

So, it turns out that it is not just the opening passage of this letter that we read last week that has been written for our church today. As we continue into the opening chapter, I can hear Paul speaking to us across the centuries, encouraging us to think in constructive ways about our identity.

We do not forget, of course, where we have found belonging in the past. And we certainly do not let go of those significant moments where God has been there for us and that have set the course of our lives. But I believe that God is today encouraging us to ground our identity in something new.

May God truly bind us together in Christ today. Let us find our belonging in the people whom God has given us right now. And let us never stop expecting that Christ will invite us to new experiences of God’s presence and will place before us new opportunities to choose to follow in God’s path.

We are God’s people. That is our identity. Other things may come and go, but we do not need to fear that we have lost ourselves so long as we remember that.