



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • www.bspsc.org

“Come from Away”
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
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Reverend Amy Miracle
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

All of us can remember times when we felt like we didn't belong. We can recall the experience of being excluded, feeling left out, not finding our place in things. This is the third and final week of our series on loneliness and belonging. Last Sunday we explored how we are created for connection and relationship. It is God's intention for us to belong to one another.

How do we know when we belong? How do we know when we belong to an organization or group or place? I asked a few different groups that question and here are some of their answers:

- We are known by name
- We may have an ID card
- We get mail, email, texts and maybe even a bill from that organization
- We understand inside jokes and insider language
- We feel welcomed, accepted, included, valued
- We can let our guard down
- We know we are part of something bigger than ourselves

When we belong, we know there's a seat for us, a place at the table.

Belonging is a wonderful feeling. But there's a potential dark side to belonging.

We find an organization, a group, an identity that feels like home. We belong. And then we want to protect that sense of belonging—guard it—hold on to it—defend it. We become aggressive towards anyone or anything that threatens our sense of belonging.

That's my best guess about what is happening in the church in Corinth. The church starts small and unified under Paul's leadership. But then Paul leaves town to start other churches. And that's when the trouble begins. The church splits into factions, each loyal to an individual leader in the church. From the language Paul uses, these groups give people a sense of belonging. Some belong to the group loyal to a leader named Apollos, others belong to Cephas, another name for Peter, and another group is loyal to Paul. Lines are drawn. People stop listening to each other. People talk past one another. Their allegiance to their faction overtakes their sense of belonging to the whole. Stop me if any of this sounds familiar. The situation is bad enough that Paul feels the need to address it in a letter.

Belonging can lead us down some pretty destructive paths. Think of the time after September 11. Patriotism was at an all-time high. That sense of belonging to the nation was at its height. And so were hate crimes. Looking at the figures compiled by the FBI, the number of anti-Muslim hate crime incidents jumped in 2001,

More sermons can be found online at <https://subsplash.com/broadstreetpresbyterian/sermons>

from 28 to 481 incidents. The number dropped in the following years, but never returned to levels reported before the 9/11 attacks.¹ The events of September 11 brought out the worst in humanity. And the best.

A true 9/11 story.

Gander is a town on the island of Newfoundland in Canada. It has a surprisingly large airport for a town of fewer than 10,000 people. Starting in the 1940s it was a refueling stop for transatlantic flights to Europe. With the advent of jets with longer range in the 1960s, most flights no longer needed to refuel so most of the Gander airport was no longer used. Until September 11, 2001.²

That day, the U.S. government closed U.S. airspace, the first and only time this has ever happened. The U.S. transportation secretary called his Canadian counterpart and asked if that nation would receive the flights currently in the air coming from Europe and Asia. Canada said “yes.” Thirty-eight planes landed in Gander that day. Filled with passengers from all over the world.

As word spread through Gander of the thousands of passengers that were soon to arrive, the town mobilized. With only 500 hotel rooms, every public space was converted into a temporary shelter. Toilet paper was collected. Cots and air mattresses were dropped off. Meals were planned. The bus drivers were on strike. They called off the strike in order to be ready to transport passengers where they needed to go. School in Gander was cancelled so the students could devote all of their energy to taking care of the visitors. The ice hockey rink became a giant refrigerator to store perishable food.

No one was allowed to get off planes until the morning of September 12. They could take off the plane only what they carried on. Their luggage remained in the cargo hold. Over 7,000 passengers got off 38 planes that day, over 7,000 people from all over the world, far away from home, disoriented, confused, afraid.

Passengers were taken to hotels, community buildings, churches, schools, and private homes, where they finally watched the news and learned what was going on. Families were kept together. All the elderly passengers were lodged in private homes. Nurses and doctors were on duty. Prescriptions were filled at no cost. Locals began inviting people home for dinner, inviting them to stay the night, cleaning their clothes.

The two small stores in town simply opened their doors and told the plane people, as they became known, to “take what you need.” Local bakeries offered fresh bread for the guests. Food was prepared by all the residents and church members and brought to schools and churches. Activities were organized to help pass the time. Some people went on boat cruises of the lakes and harbors. Some went to see local forests. Every need was met. Later, in news interviews, tears would stream down their faces as passengers shared these stories of welcome.

The story of what happened in Gander is told in a Broadway musical called *Come from Away*.³ “Come from away” is a Canadian expression. It refers to someone who has moved to the area from somewhere else. Let me use it in a sentence.

I’m come from away myself, from Ontario, though my mother was born here in Gander.

¹ <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-09-12/data-hate-crimes-against-muslims-increased-after-911>

² The story of what happened the week of September 11 in Gander and the surrounding communities is told in many news stories including https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/on-sept-11-a-tiny-canadian-town-opened-its-runways-and-heart-to-7000-stranded-travelers/2016/09/08/89d875da-75e5-11e6-8149-b8d05321db62_story.html?utm_term=.c1aef6d34bb9 A book was written: *The Day the World Came to Town: 9/11 in Gander* by Jim DeFede.

³ Music, lyrics and play written and composed by Irene Sankoff and David Hein.

For a few days, thousands of people came from away to Gander. And they were welcomed with open arms and open hearts. They become honorary, life-long Newfoundlanders. For several days, the plane people and the citizens of Gander lived a community of kindness, hospitality, generosity.

It could have gone differently. It usually goes so differently. Especially in times of great turmoil, it's easy to fall back into old categories and allegiances. Stick with what you know, stick with whom you know, stick to your people, your faction, your party.

So what can we learn from what happened in Gander? These were extraordinary times. Anyone can rise to the occasion for a few days. It didn't last. Well, actually it did last. When the passengers from Delta Flight 15 were finally all on board and heading back to the United States, one of the passengers got on the PA and reminded everyone of the hospitality they had received at the hands of total strangers. He said he was going to set up a trust fund to provide scholarships for Gander high school students to help them go to college. He requested donations of any amount from the other travelers. Before the plane landed, they had raised \$29,000. And that was just the beginning. Contributions to the fund now total almost \$1.5 million, and have helped pay the college bills of 134 students. Friendships among the plane people and the people of Gander continue to this day. On September 11, 2011, hundreds of plane people returned to Gander for a reunion. Everyone who spent time in Gander took some of Gander home with them.

Again, I ask what can we learn from what happened in Gander? What if we rise to the occasion more often? If we don't wait until a storm or tornado or terrorist attack to interact with our neighbors? What if we focus not on that which divides us but on the ways that we belong to one another? What if our sense of belonging is always tempered by hospitality and generosity and kindness?

I think that's what Paul is trying to get across in his letter to the church in Corinth. He uses words direct and a bit sarcastic. The unity of the church, he argues, is found not in the personality of this leader or that leader, not in the narrow agenda of a faction, not in the superficial comfort of being around people just like us. True unity comes from Christ. "Is Christ divided?" he asks. "Of course not," is the answer he is looking for. Paul, who knows more than anyone does the pitfalls, the challenges, the sheer impossibility of trying to contain the diversity of his congregations within the life of the church, he fights for unity. He cajoles, he criticizes, he pleads, he argues, he devotes his life to the bold and foolish experiment of trying to hold together diversity within unity, to create a culture of welcome and hospitality, where everyone belongs.

The truth is that all of us come from away. Come from different experiences. Different life stories. Different fears. Different hopes. All of us come from away.

And. This is so hard for us to believe, so hard for us to claim. And, we all belong.

The day that brings that mutual belonging home for me is Ash Wednesday. On that day, we are marked as belonging to God. All of us look the same with ashes on the forehead. That day, we are reminded of our common humanity, common fragility, common brokenness, common potential for kindness and generosity.

All of that is captured in the ashes that we have on our foreheads. Ashes are a visible reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return, that we cannot make it through this life on our own, that we need the forgiveness, the strength, the wisdom that comes from the grace of God alone.

On Ash Wednesday we wear a public sign to bear witness that the one who shaped us in the womb will also shelter us through the most lonesome valley and, in due time, will welcome us into our longed for home. It is the day that I know, in the very depth of my being, that I belong to God.

That sense of belonging captured in the ashes. It is powerful. It is life changing. It is so tempting to protect it. Defend it. Guard it.

But no, at our best, we share it. We share it. With open hearts and open hands.

Amen.