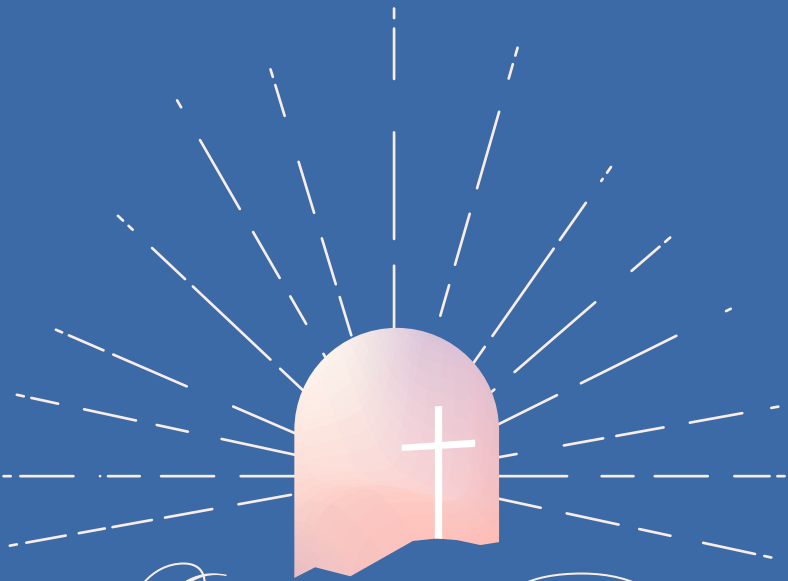




General Commission on
RELIGION & RACE



Easter tide

DEVOTIONAL

I Belong: Stories on Resurrection & Belonging

EASTERTIDE DEVOTIONAL

I BELONG: STORIES ON RESURRECTION & BELONGING

In a time marked by polarization, injustice, and deep questions about who truly belongs, “I Belong: Stories on Resurrection & Belonging” devotional series offers a sacred counter-witness. We invited contributors from across our richly diverse United Methodist connection to share personal stories of belonging—moments when they encountered radical welcome, spiritual homecoming, holy affirmation, or healing made possible through community.

Each reflection, paired with scripture, prayer and a practice of belonging, becomes an act of resistance against the forces that divide us. Together, these daily testimonies guide us from the promise of Easter Resurrection toward the Spirit-filled vision of a Pentecost Church where every person is seen, valued, and embraced.

This series is designed to:

- ♦ Cultivate a theologically rooted understanding of belonging as a spiritual practice and a justice commitment.
- ♦ Amplify diverse voices and lived experiences across the UMC, especially in a season when marginalized communities continue to face threats to their dignity and safety.
- ♦ Inspire daily actions of inclusion, courage, and solidarity, nurturing communities that embody God’s vision of justice and beloved community.

In a world where exclusion is loud, these reflections remind us that God’s welcome is louder—and that building a Church and society where all belong is holy work for our time.

Table of Contents

1. SURPRISE!	2
2. The Space In-Between	3
3. Belonging Beyond the Title	4
4. Where Have You Seen Goodness and Mercy?	5
5. The Cleansing Rain: Sent by the Ancestors	6
6. You Just Did	9
7. The Grace of Belonging	10
8. Let It Be So	11
9. Resilience Through Faith	12
10. Looking for Home	13
11. The Responsibility to Feed	15
12. Last and First and Last	16
13. The Less	18
14. Unmasked: I Belong!	19
15. Resurrection in Comida y Canción	21
16. A Community of Strangers & Resurrection	22
17. The Ones I Was Told to Fear	24
18. Shhh, Not Here: Resurrection Has a Voice	25
19. What Language Taught Me About Belonging	26
20. I Did Baptism Wrong, in the Right Church	28
21. The Chosen Child	29
22. Belonging and Believing	30
23. When the Spirit Speaks	32
24. A Cup of Connection	33
25. Forming New Patterns	35
26. ALL BELONG	36
27. Belonging and Resisting	37
28. One in the Spirit	38
29. Still Belonging: Strength Found in Weakness	39
30. The House with the Open Door	40
31. Beyond the Hustle: “Get In Where You Fit In” vs. True Belonging	41
32. Walls Will Fall	42
33. Act Well Your Part	43
34. Living as a Sojourner	44
35. Finding Home Far From Home	46

SURPRISE!

Rev. Marva Usher-Kerr

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.

GENESIS 45:3-5

Most of us have been surprised at some point in our lives. Some surprises are good in that they bring joy such as a marriage proposal or acceptance into a job that you weren't expecting. However, there are surprises that are not so great such as the sudden death of a friend or family member or being fired from your job without cause.

I remember that as I was approaching one of my big birthdays, I had sought some friends and family to go out with me to celebrate. However as hard as I tried, everyone was too busy or didn't return my call. The one friend that did return my call was one that I considered a bit flighty and not known for keeping time. Her understanding of time and mine were very different as we are products of our cultural training and upbringing. We actually stopped speaking for a time due to this divide.

Surprisingly she gave me a party which warmed my heart! God sometimes surprises us by using people who we have underestimated or disliked to bless our lives. Joseph lets his family know in no uncertain terms that God's hand was on him and the events that saved all of them. God wants to still surprise us even today!! Perhaps if we would walk in the shoes of those different than us we might open ourselves up to God's surprise!! Granted some of the surprises might not be ones we want, but we need to be willing to allow the surprises of God to work for us as the Lord wills.

PRAYER: Loving and Surprising God, thank you so much for your presence in our lives. Keep on surprising us so that we can delight with your diverse children and find common ground. Allow us to be the hands of your surprising action for our siblings as we walk the earth together. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Reflect on the following questions:

- ◆ Can you remember at least one good surprise that someone sprung on you - especially from someone you did not expect?
- ◆ How can you be God's instrument of good surprise for someone else?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ◆ [Othering & Belonging Institute](#)
- ◆ [Radical Belonging in an Age of Othering](#)

The Space In-Between

Aimee Hong

“The Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything.”

DEUTERONOMY 2:7

Being Asian American often means living in the in-between, never feeling fully claimed by the place your family came from, yet not entirely fitting into what “American” is supposed to be. That in-between space can often feel lonely.

In graduate school, I came face to face with the many perceptions of who “I am,” all within the same environment. I was one of the few Asian American students in the midst of a large international student body. Many of the international students perceived me as “American,” while many American students saw me as “Asian.” Meanwhile, I felt I didn’t fully fit into either identity.

These in-between spaces can be frustrating. I can relate to the Israelites in the wilderness being in-between spaces. Yet, like the Israelites, I’ve learned that the in-between is often where God’s presence is most deeply felt.

It reminds me that God is forming in me an identity that reflects a broader, more expansive belonging than any single culture could hold.

PRAYER: God of the borderlands and the in-between, thank you for walking with me in the in-between spaces that are not defined. Thank you for weaving my unique path of living in-between and helping me embrace the mix of cultures, histories, and stories that continue to shape me. Make the in-between a place of blessing, a place where I discover who I am and discover who You are. Thank you for the sacred ground of being in-between. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Take a moment to intentionally honor all the components of your identity:

- ◆ Notice when you code-switch and pause to appreciate the skill it takes to weave between cultures/identities.
- ◆ Acknowledge a moment when you felt different and bless it rather than resisting it.

Belonging Beyond the Title

Ivan Gonzalez

“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

RUTH 1:16-17

Discernment has never felt like a straight line for me. It has felt more like a long walk, sometimes quiet, sometimes full of clarity, sometimes heavy with grief, and other times full of hope. Listening for God’s voice has always required me to sit with uncertainty, and to trust that even when things feel unclear, God is still present.

For many years, I pursued ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church. I served as a provisional elder, walking alongside people in their most tender moments, preaching, praying, and trying to show up faithfully for God’s people. That season of my life was beautiful. It formed me, and in many ways, I still miss it.

But over time, through prayer, spiritual direction, and honest reflection, I began to sense God inviting me into something different, into a more intentional season of lay ministry. What surprised me was not the invitation itself, but the fear that came with it. I wondered if I would still belong. Would I feel out of place in the Church without the title I had carried for so long? Would something feel lost?

What I found instead was grace.

As I stepped forward with honesty and trust, I didn’t feel more distant from God or from my community. I felt closer. My faith felt more grounded. My sense of calling felt clearer. I realized that my belonging was never rooted in a role or a credential. It was rooted in God’s steady love and in my willingness to keep responding to that love, even when the path looked different than I had imagined.

Ruth’s words to Naomi feel especially meaningful to me, “Where you go, I will go.” Belonging is not about having everything figured out. It is about staying present with God and with one another as we continue to become who we are called to be.

Not all who wander are lost. Sometimes, we are simply learning how to walk more honestly with God.

PRAYER: God of grace, thank you for walking with us through every season of change. When we let go of what once defined us, remind us that we are still held, still called, and still deeply loved. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Spend a few quiet moments this week reflecting on this question, what might God be inviting you to release, and what new life might be waiting on the other side? Consider writing a short prayer or note to yourself as an act of trust.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ♦ *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* by Henri Nouwen

Where Have You Seen Goodness and Mercy?

Rev. Jeremiah Jasper

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.”

PSALM 23:6

As I write this devotion on February 10, 2026, I just signed up to volunteer at the Randolph County Overnight Warming Center here in Elkins, West Virginia from 1-7 am on February 11-12, 2026.

I am one of the 18 children, both to my mom and dad. I grew up in Oak Hill, West Virginia, and I played basketball earning a scholarship to West Virginia Institute of Technology in Montgomery, West Virginia. My teammates experienced God’s goodness and mercy as I ministered to them in college. I am a graduate of Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary of Evanston, Illinois. I experienced God’s goodness and mercy thru Mrs. Virginia Sanders who has treated me like a son for the last 40 years. Both of my parents died before I was nine years old. Because of Mrs. Virginia Sanders, I have never felt motherless or fatherless.

In 1972 when my mom died suddenly, her mom left her husband on the west side of Chicago to move to Oak Hill, West Virginia to raise her 10 grandchildren.

I have seen and lived out the goodness and mercy of God. I saw the goodness and mercy in 1987 in Evanston, Illinois at the First Baptist Church Homeless Shelter as the night supervisor and at St. Mark’s Church hospitality center.

In 1989 I lived out the goodness and mercy of God serving the Court St. UMC (Welch) which is closed now, Metropolitan UMC (Gary) and Mt. Zion UMC (Coalwood). I also lived out the goodness and mercy of God when I applied for received a \$25,000 grant to do an after school tutoring program in Mc Dowell County, West Virginia - one of the poorest counties in the state and nation because of the decline in coal jobs and not locally taxing the coal.

I experienced God’s goodness and mercy in 2019 as I traveled to Nairobi, Kenya with West Virginia Presbyterians to build a church. I experienced God’s goodness and mercy in Davis & Elkins College and in Durban, South Africa attending the World Methodist Conference packing meals for Stop Hunger Now. I experienced God’s goodness and mercy in August 2024 on the Egypt-Gaza border praying with Rabbis for Peace for peace in Gaza and the West Bank. I also experienced goodness and mercy in Baltimore a few days ago with the CORR chairpersons and members being trained for the quadrennium.

PRAYER: We pray we will be goodness and mercy for someone during the Easter season. We pray for the lost, the least, the last, the poor, the homeless, the people of Gaza and the West Bank, the people of Russia and the Ukraine and for world peace. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Show goodness and mercy in serving others as an individual, as a church and/or as a pastoral leader.

The Cleansing Rain: Sent by the Ancestors

Ragghi Rain

You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it;
 The river of God is full of water.
 You provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.
 You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges,
 softening it with showers and blessing its growth.

PSALM 65:9-10

“Our Elders teach that healing often comes when the Earth and sky meet. On such a day, the rain became the Ancestors’ song—falling gently upon a young one who had carried too much sorrow.”

For seven long years, we worked tirelessly to bring our Three Sisters’ Tribes children and youth to the land where our Ancestors once lived. Their homelands were taken from them when they were forcibly relocated to this reservation. Over time, the area became even more restricted as newcomers claimed additional territory, pushing the original inhabitants further away. They were removed from their original homeland to Tidewater, with a promise that this would be their Homeland where their spirits are said to continue to walk. Later, the state of Delaware displaced the community from its reservation land again, offering no compensation in return. Although the state now claims this land, it rightfully belongs to the spirits of those who came before us and to the seven generations yet to walk upon it.

The journey back was arduous, suggesting that time may have been required for healing. Upon returning, it was a suitable moment. On that day, we were on a charter bus. As I walked up the aisle and greeted each child, I noticed one of the younger participants sitting quietly—his shoulders slumped and his gaze focused downward. For two and a half days, he had been silent, seemingly carrying an unseen burden.

“Have you seen my Niimat (brother)?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” I replied. “He is sitting with your Noohkom (grandmother).”

The Niimat only nodded and dropped his gaze again. His silence pierced my heart. Usually, he and his little brother were inseparable. But now his eyes held something more profound—a distance, as if he had built a wall around his small heart to keep the hurt from spilling out. There was an old sadness in him, one that did not belong to a child. It was the kind of sorrow that grows quietly when the world has taken too much—when home has been lost more than once and words no longer feel safe. I wanted to reach out and lift that sadness, but I knew this was a journey the Ancestors themselves would have to touch.

We had planned this visit to Tidewater Park, a place of great spiritual significance to our people. However, heavy rain began to fall. Despite the downpour, the Creator had different plans for us. The founder of Tidewater Park spoke, and Elder Herman shared the history of the land, reminding us of its deep meaning. Even in the pouring rain, the children and youth joyfully ran about, as if the water itself welcomed them home.

I continued to monitor the counselors and the younger children, as was my responsibility. Then, across the grounds, I saw him: the older Niimat who had been so silent. He climbed onto

a log as heavy rain fell around him. Suddenly, the clouds parted, and sunlight streamed down, wrapping him in a warm embrace. He lifted his face to the sky, and for the first time in days, a smile spread across his lips. Shaking his head as if to cast off his sadness, he laughed joyfully. He leapt off the log and ran to join the older boys, his laughter mingling with theirs. His younger Niimat soon followed, finding his own spot among children his age. Their joy was infectious, spreading like the sun's rays breaking through the clouds.

In that moment, I realized something important: healing does not always come from medicine or counselors. Healing often originates from the Earth, from our Ancestors, and from the transformative power of cleansing rain and warm sunlight. It felt as if the Ancestors had summoned the storm to wash him clean and then parted the clouds to show him that he was not alone. The land itself recognized him, and the spirits remembered him, reaffirming our deep connection to the Earth and our Ancestors. This recognition of the land's role in healing is a reminder of the respect and connection we should all have for our Earth.

That evening, the Niimat who had once carried silence now had friends. He laughed as the girls playfully teased him about being funny and kind of cute. His eyes, no longer fixed on the ground, shone as if they held a secret gift. His transformation stood as a testament to the healing power of the Earth and the Ancestors, serving as living proof of the resilience and joy that our community nurtures. His joyous laughter echoed through the camp, a testament to the strength and joy that our community, united in love and support, fosters in its members. This resilience and joy are something we can all be proud of and a source of hope for the future.

At the end of camp, he approached me and asked, "Can I come again? Maybe I can help you next time." He also expressed a desire to learn our traditional dance, which embodies strength and joy through movements that honor the Earth Mother. His eagerness to learn felt like a spark, proof that the rain had nourished his spirit.

Through their wisdom and love, the Ancestors sent the rain to wash away his pain and filled him with a healing power beyond anything else. The land recognized him, the spirits remembered him, and even the sun acknowledged that he truly belonged.

PRAYER:

Kiisheelumukweengw (Creator — One who creates through thought),
We give thanks for the storms that cleanse and the sunlight that restores.
We honor the Ancestors who still walk beside us,
Whose voices move in the wind and whose tears fall as rain.
We give thanks to Kikun Ahkiyii (Earth Mother),
Who holds the memory of the children beneath her soil and cradles our feet in her care.
May every child who feels forgotten
Be reminded by the Kikun Ahkiyii (Earth Mother) that they are known.
May our hearts be as open as the sky after the storm.
Nasgigwo Winigalsd — Let it be this way. We Are Still Here.
Prayer of Release for "The Cleansing Rain"
Creator, Kiisheelumukweengw,

You have walked beside these words from the first drop of rain to the final breath of sunlight.
We now place this story in your hands and in the care of the Ancestors who sent it.
May these words travel gently into the world,
finding those who are waiting to remember that they belong.
May they carry healing like rain upon dry ground,
and hope like the laughter of a child after sorrow.
We give thanks to Kikun Ahkiyii, Earth Mother,
for holding the memory of all who came before us,
and for welcoming us home again.
Let this work go where it is needed,
and let it return to us in peace.

Nasgigwo Winigalsd (Let it be this way)
Kiikaay RagghiRain with heart, wind, and water.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: When have you felt the land itself remember you? Spend a few quiet moments outdoors after a storm or near water. Listen for the voice of Creator and the Ancestors reminding you that you belong — not because of what you do, but because the Earth knows your name.

You Just Did

Rev. Tom LeBeau

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

PSALM 130

There I was, sitting on my bed in a hospital psychiatric unit. How did this happen? I knew I was very depressed and had a history of a depressive disorder. But I'd started taking medication again and was in counseling and hadn't needed hospitalization before. But this time I realized I truly was in danger of hurting myself and reluctantly agreed to be hospitalized. But I felt like a total failure as a pastor, former mental health nurse and counselor. I muttered, "Dammit, God, I can't even pray." Then a thought flashed through my brain, "You just did. You just prayed." It was a sliver of sunlight that pierced the darkness of my spirit. I realized that God had not abandoned me. Indeed, Christ was certainly present through the love of my wife, good medical care, generous friends and a very caring district superintendent. I recovered and returned to the pastorate after several weeks. I learned many things through that episode. I learned that the depth of my depression was an early symptom of Parkinson's Disease. Somehow, the deep depression prepared me to deal with the subsequent diagnosis of my neurological disorder. I learned that the deep self-loathing was a form of oppression. It was mental illness stigma that I had internalized. Through it I learned the importance of practicing self-compassion. It's helped me to deepen my empathy for others going through difficult emotional times. God loves us in our highest moments and our lowest, and in every moment in between. Real strength lies in reaching out to our community, our supports for help – and in the process, bolstering our ability to be there for others. As Henry Nouwen phrased it, it's being a "wounded healer." The Resurrected Christ modeled this when he showed his wounded hands and feet to his disciples. Thanks be to God!

PRAYER: O Loving God, thank you for coming among us in Christ and living a genuine human life, with all its highs and lows. Help us to risk being real with each other. Grant us the wisdom to know how and when. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Call to mind one person through whom Christ's love has been present to you — a spouse, friend, caregiver, colleague, pastor, or even someone whose kindness surprised you. Silently give thanks for them. If you feel able, consider reaching out to them today with a brief word of gratitude. Belonging grows when it is named.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ♦ [The Grieving Leader: How to Lead through Loss – AdVance Leadership](#)
- ♦ [Grieving While Leading – Faith+Lead](#)
- ♦ [Honest, Vulnerable Talk About Mental Health – Faith+Lead](#)

The Grace of Belonging

Rev. Leslie Casupanan Dela Cruz

“But now, this is what the Lord says—He who created you, Jacob, He who formed you, Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine.”

ISAIAH 43:1

For twenty years, God placed in my heart a quiet passion—to reach the Indigenous Ayta people. Following that call meant leaving the comfort of everything familiar: our family, church, and community. My husband and I stepped into a world so different from our own.

When we arrived, the reality of mission life struck hard. We were strangers- outsiders trying to find our place, learning to listen, to adapt and to love. The Ayta people looked at us with curiosity, some with caution. Many nights, I asked God, “Do I really belong here?” The days were long, the food simple, and loneliness often lingered.

But slowly, God built bridges through small, tender moments- sharing meals over open fires, laughing with Ayta mothers and children, and joining worship beneath the trees. Barriers began to fall. I learned that belonging doesn’t happen overnight — it grows through humility, patience, and love.

In their struggles and joys, I saw the heart of Christ — the One who chose to dwell among the poor, the rejected, and the overlooked. The Aytas taught me to find joy in simplicity and gratitude in scarcity. Through them, I learned that belonging means not just being accepted but being transformed by love.

Then came a deeper test. Three months after a mission trip to Nepal, I was diagnosed with severe endometriosis. On April 23, 2018, I underwent an eleven-hour surgery. When I woke up, my uterus, ovaries, and appendix were gone—my intestines were cut and stitched. I couldn’t eat or move. I felt stripped of everything—strength, health, womanhood, identity.

Yet in that stillness, I felt the nearness of Jesus. The same Savior who was wounded and left alone seemed to whisper, “Do not fear... you are Mine.” In that moment, I understood that belonging isn’t about where I am, but whose I am. I belong to the risen Christ and that is enough.

God has shown me countless signs of grace—healing, provision, protection and love that carry us through every season. Resurrection is no longer just something I talk about; it is the hope that breathes through every broken place in me. Even more, God has given me with something far richer—the grace of belonging. And so, I rest in this assurance: wherever we are, whatever we have lost, we are never alone, His voice still calls gently: “You are Mine.”

PRAYER: God of grace and belonging, grace us to remember we are Yours. Grace us to help others belong in Your kin-dom. Amen

PRACTICE OF BELONGING:

- ♦ Where have you struggled to belong – in your calling, your relationships, or even within yourself?
- ♦ How might God be whispering Isaiah 43:1 to you today, “Do not fear... you are Mine”?
- ♦ What “resurrection moments” has He given you- times when He turned your pain into purpose and your loneliness into belonging?

Let It Be So

Rev. Marvel Souza

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

ISAIAH 43:1

For most of my life, belonging felt conditional. As an openly gay pastor, I learned early on that there were spaces where my calling was questioned and my presence tolerated rather than celebrated. I loved the church deeply, yet I often wondered if there would ever be a place where I could fully belong, without hiding parts of who God created me to be.

There came a season when doors closed abruptly. Threats and rejection made it clear that remaining where I was would come at the cost of my safety and my spirit. Leaving my country was not something I planned or longed for, but it became necessary. That moment felt like loss, exile, and grief all at once. I carried with me the fear that I might never find home again.

Even so, resurrection often takes root in silence.

In the midst of displacement and uncertainty, God met me through people and communities who did not ask me to prove myself before welcoming me. I found spaces where my story was received with care, where my ministry was affirmed, and where my life was named as sacred. Slowly, I realized that belonging was not something I had to earn. It was something God had already declared.

Isaiah’s words became deeply personal to me: “I have called you by name, you are mine.” God’s claim came before any institution’s approval. God’s belonging preceded every rejection. Like the empty tomb on Easter morning, this truth changed everything. What once felt like an ending became a beginning. What felt like exclusion became an opening into a broader, more grace-filled community.

Resurrection did not erase my wounds but gave them meaning. It taught me that God’s beloved community is not defined by walls, borders, or conditions, but by love that makes room for all. In Christ, I did not lose my place, I found it.

PRAYER: Holy and loving God, thank you for calling us by name and claiming us as your own. Help us trust your voice of belonging and share that love freely with others. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Today, reflect on a place where you once felt uncertain about belonging. Ask yourself: Where has God already claimed you as beloved? How might you help create that same sense of belonging for someone else?

Resilience Through Faith

Rev. Dr. Adlene Kufarimai

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

JEREMIAH 29:11

Leaving the familiar landscapes of Zimbabwe for the unknown journey to America was both thrilling and daunting. I carried with me the memories of a close-knit community and the comfort of belonging, yet I also held onto a quiet hope for new beginnings. My first worship experience at Ben Hill United Methodist Church in Atlanta filled me with unexpected joy. Seeing faces that reminded me of my uncles, aunts, and cousins rekindled a deep sense of home, and I felt the warmth of God’s presence assuring me that I was not alone.

However, my sense of belonging was soon tested when I began seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), a predominantly African American institution. My “African-ness” seemed to set me apart rather than unite me with others. There were moments of isolation and exclusion—study groups rescheduled without notice, whispered doubts about my abilities, and an unspoken reminder that I did not quite fit in. Those seasons of loneliness pushed me to rediscover my worth through God’s lens. Leaning on the promise of Jeremiah 29:11, I anchored myself in the assurance that God’s plans for me were good, intentional, and full of hope.

In time, God surrounded me with mentors who affirmed my calling and gifts. Professors like Dr. Marsha Snulligan Haney, who invited me to serve as her Teaching Assistant in Missiology, Dr. Anne Wimberly, who entrusted me with mentoring youth, assistant staff in the office of Youth Hope Builders Academy, and Dr. Elizabeth Walker, who encouraged me to assist others in Family Therapy—all became living testimonies of divine favor. Their trust and affirmation reminded me that God’s plan was unfolding beautifully. Today, I see my journey as a partnership with God in shaping lives, nurturing faith, and transforming the world—proof that resilience through faith brings forth purpose beyond pain.

PRAYER: Gracious God, thank You for reminding me that Your plans are steadfast and filled with hope. When life takes me through unfamiliar paths, help me to trust in your divine purpose. Teach me to see my challenges as opportunities for growth and to find belonging in your love. May my resilience reflect your faithfulness and inspire others to hold on to your promises. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING:

- ◆ Notice a cultural, generational or personality difference today and choose to appreciate instead of judging.
- ◆ Practice hospitality by inviting someone to sit with you, join a conversation, or share a meal.
- ◆ Today, intentionally make space for someone else’s idea or contribution to be heard.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ◆ *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* by Henri Nouwen

Looking for Home

Rev. Dr. Lydia Muñoz

People will sit under their own vines and fig trees with no one to make them afraid.

MICAH 4:4

I grew up a missionary's kid. By the time I was in my 2nd grade I was clear across the other side of the continent in Central America enrolling in a one room school carrying my own chair to school. It was an adventure I assure you.

However, it also created a real sense of longing. Longing for permanence and longing for continuity as a kid who had to grow up fast in a fast-changing reality. By the time I was in my third grade we had lived in 5 different homes.

So, while other people can talk about the people who they went to elementary school with that are still their best friends, I can only share with you about places where I remember certain events happening but not because I developed deep roots in any of them. I can tell you, where I was when a massive earthquake hit Guatemala. Or where I was sitting in a vehicle that was overtaken by government soldiers. I can tell you about one of my elementary teachers in Puerto Rico who recognized what PTSD looked like in me and my baby brother long before I was ever aware.

Home and a sense of belonging anywhere has always been a thorn on my side, as Paul says. Except when it comes to music.

Music was the only thing I can remember that has been a constant companion in my life. I don't remember the houses we lived in or some of the people we encountered but I can tell you every song that correlates with a particular experience I was having throughout my life. Music became my home and the place that has always given me a sense of belonging and security.

The people that I make music with are not only my colleagues and professional partners, but they are also home to me. The place I can truly be myself - trauma and all. Micah reminds us that all of us need our own vine tree to sit under. The place where we feel safe to be ourselves and never feel afraid. The truth is that what gives you a sense of belonging may be a lot different than me, but the results are the same. For me this is a spiritual reminder to be aware that as a people who are called to form community, our individuality is not what divides us but rather it is when we begin to think that my vine or my fig tree is more worthy or more special than my neighbors' sense of belonging.

Micah's call is not about a community divided but a community who is called to God's holy mountain to reclaim its dignity both individually and collectively. Where is home now for me? It may not be in a specific geographical location, but it is the place where my song is set free.

PRAYER: God of all those who wander looking for home, we give you thanks for your faithful acompañamiento. Grant us the courage to claim our uniqueness even as we build the beloved community. So that we can sing together the song of freedom, justice and equity that brings peace. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Take one day out of your week and practice seeing the world through music's eyes. As you go about your day, whether you are commuting to work, packing grocery

bags, or taking care of babies think of everything you are doing and reflect on the first song that pops into your head. It can be funny, serious or just weird, but I guarantee you, your heart is trying to tell you something. What I have discovered is that the more I do this I am engaging in the art of theological reflection and my worship becomes incarnational. Keep singing friends.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ◆ Share your story! [Our Sacred Journey: Stories of Faith and Culture](#)

The Responsibility to Feed

Rev. Analete Jorge

Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

MATTHEW 14:16

Her first appointment as a pastor was in a rural community called Cabala, located in the Province of Icolo e Bengo, 30 km from the capital city. The scenario was unpromising: No power, no drinking water, no secure telephone line, about 50 members, of which 40 were adults over 50 years old, no ministry to children and young people, despite the fact that there were children and young people in the village. Low purchasing power, the Sunday offer was on average USD 2.

Friends and family asked to appeal to the bishop in order to annul the appointment, as it would harm the children. The community was skeptical because they did not believe in a young woman as a shepherdess, who did not speak the local language, was not a peasant and who would receive a salary of no more than 40 USD.

I remembered the episode of Jesus when he fed more than 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish. In a hostile environment, in the desert, Jesus guides to feed all those people “give them something to eat”, it becomes a message to fulfill the mission, sharing and fraternity, to be the ones to bring hope and comfort to our brothers and sisters through the message of Jesus.

When I left Cabala, I left a choir of 16 young people, 200 children, a group of young people motivated for the mission. They received the food that comes from heaven, perceived and multiplied; Everyone around them received a piece of spiritual “fish and bread.”

PRAYER: Blessed God, help us to realize that we are the continuators of your mission, that of “feeding” we are part of the mission of serving. You have already shown us the way, you have clarified the mission, you give us eyes and courage to do so.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: A hug, a visit, a phone call. Give something of yourself for the good of others. Giving and a mission is for me and you.

Last and First and Last

Rev. Dr. Clifton Howard

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

MATTHEW 20:1-16

If memory serves, I was walking through the airport when I overheard someone say what we often hear said. They were words spoken to someone clearly identified as part of the military family, “thank you for your service.” The person who spoke these familiar words did not seem to know the person to whom they spoke, but the gesture was a way of honoring those who often serve in places unseen by most of us, in ways that often put them at risk in order to keep us safe. It is a small but appropriate way to express appreciation to someone who offers their life in service to us.

As my walk through the airport continued, I came across someone clearly identified as part of the airport staff. With broom and dustpan in hand, they swept away the trash left behind by travelers like me—some of whom maybe drop trash onto the floor unawares and others who just don’t bother to find a trash can. I noticed not one person stopping to engage this person with words like, “thank you for your service.” The difference was stark! (I’m ashamed to confess that I didn’t bother to say “thanks” either.)

It’s easy to imagine that the military service person felt a warm sense of belonging. I wondered if the airport floor sweeper felt that same sense of belonging? It reminded me that we all long to feel loved and belong. And it reminded me that Jesus has the capacity and willingness to love and welcome every one of us, even though our bias and temptation are to invite only certain people to belong.

PRAYER: Lord, by your grace you invite each person into your family. Forgive us when we act as though only certain ones are worthy to belong. Fill us with your Spirit that with urgency and eagerness we will seek out persons to experience the love and belonging for which Christ lived and died and rose again. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Express appreciation to someone who may often be overlooked. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for them.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ◆ [What Is Belonging?](#)
- ◆ [The Impact of Belonging and Gratitude: A Conversation with Dr. Geoffrey Cohen – Thrive Global](#)

The Less

Rev. Mimi Luebbers

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take and eat. This is my body.” He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many so that their sins may be forgiven. I tell you, I won’t drink wine again until that day when I drink it in a new way with you in my Father’s kingdom.” Then, after singing songs of praise, they went to the Mount of Olives.

MATTHEW 26:26-30

Some years ago, my spouse, 3 sons, and son-in-law were invited to participate in our church’s dramatic portrayal of the Last Supper. The only one interested was my youngest son, Aaron, who has an intellectual/developmental disability. While I was pleased that he was interested, I was concerned that he would not be able to memorize his lines. But I felt the nudge to extend his offer, so I called the director back, bracing myself for the kind of response I typically get. Instead, the director received my call with enthusiasm and suggested my son could read his part. She read it to me over the phone. When she finished, I could hear her husband blurt out, “Why does he have to say all that?!” I asked whether I could adapt his role by shortening it and she agreed.

In the days leading up to the Maundy Thursday service, Aaron diligently practiced his short piece. On the night of the service, he stood to play the part of James the Less, son of “Al-fee-us.” Haltingly, he read, “Just like Simon, people don’t know much about me.” That’s when it dawned on me that one of Jesus’ disciples could have been disabled like my son. Why not? Tears streamed down my cheeks as I listened to my son with pride. “I followed Jesus, along with the other disciples, to listen and learn from him. I, too, saw him live, die, and rise from the dead. Then, I went on to tell his story. I live my whole life for Jesus, because he is my best friend. I love him. And I serve him.”

When the man playing Jesus stood to offer the bread of life and the cup of salvation, I reached for more tissues as he spoke the words, “all of you.” The blood of the covenant was poured out for the salvation of many, including those the world deems the less. I long for the day when all are not only welcome, but find places of true belonging at the table.

PRAYER: God of us all and not just some, help us to see those the world sees as less more like you see them, so that your kingdom may come just a little nearer to earth. Amen

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Who have you thought of as less? How might you offer them an opportunity to be more?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ♦ [“Theology and Disability Ministry”](#)

Unmasked: I Belong!

Rev. Marcus Singleton

Jesus came and told his disciples, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

MATTHEW 28:18-19

Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poignant poem, “We Wear The Mask” (1895), captures the deep anguish of Black people in the post-Civil War era. Faced with the constant threat of racial violence, Black men and women were forced to suppress their true emotions as a means of survival. Dunbar voices the stifling silencing practice:

“We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile..”

Dunbar’s poem resurfaced in my mind during a 2014 meeting on racial inequities. As I worked alongside Black and white leaders to identify solutions, I found myself internally fuming. Yet, in an effort to temper contention, I spoke through my own ‘mask’, saying, “I don’t want to be perceived as an angry Black Man.” Before I could continue, a Black colleague interrupted: “Marcus, you are an angry Black Man.”

That moment was transformative. My colleague’s insight stripped away my intentional hiding and shading of deeply rooted resentment. Years of submerged outrage from racial oppression had been mounting. The systems and people imposing racial violence against Black United Methodists within our conference demanded authentic expression.

Hearing “Marcus, you are an angry Black Man” awakened the reality that external systems were silencing my pain and dictating how I could express it. Accepting the suppression of my pain—internalized oppression—had denied my full humanity. In that moment of perceived solidarity, I mimicked Dunbar’s concluding first stanza:

“...With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.”

But my colleague’s insight compelled me to speak with ALL the pain and conviction of a hurting human being. I accepted that the achievement of healing, freedom, and justice only occurs when the oppressed and victimized name their truth. As Jesus faced the cross and was delivered from the grave, appearing with his disciples and naming his truth, “I have been given ALL authority in heaven and earth,” so must I.

I am not angry! I am passionate about the freedom of Black people from racial violence. Owning one’s voice and trauma is an act of discipleship. Speaking one’s truth is a decision to believe, just as God resurrected Jesus from the grave, God has freed and will use ALL of me in the work of racial justice.

Unmasked, I belong! An unmasked person is a danger to oppressive systems because an unmasked person is free—free from silence. Unmasked owning my truth, I belong – to share and live my truth.

Unmasked, like Jesus, we too “have been given ALL authority in heaven and on earth—to go and make disciples” wherever we are.

PRAYER: O God of freedom and justice, help me to believe that with you, I have ALL power and authority to live unmasked. Guide me to unmask my truth and to make the decision to believe you have freed me and will use me in your work of justice, love, and healing. Amen!

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Where have you allowed masks to hide your trauma, your voice, or your humanity as a means of survival due to threat of harm or violence? Seek out a friend, a safe place, or trusted group where you can Unmask and own, live, and share your truth.

Resurrection in Comida y Canción

Rev. Dr. Eduardo Bousson

A short time later, those standing there came and said to Peter, “You must be one of them. The way you talk gives you away.”

MATTHEW 26:73

“How come you didn’t like reggaeton?” my friend asked me. I was telling her that it was only later in life that I warmed to the music genres from when I was young. Back then, I listened almost exclusively to rock, 80’s rock. In my mind, there was no space for anything else.

I was born and raised in Puerto Rico. The story of my people is long and complex. When I was growing up, in the circles I moved in and in my family of origin, there was a preference for Puerto Rico’s annexation to the United States. Even when this was not a value in my family, the culture of annexation measures whiteness as of greater value and everything related to Puerto Rican culture as of lesser value. I was highly critical of any cultural experience that did not come from the United States. Without knowing it, I was denying parts of my identity. By thinking of my culture as of lesser value, I was declaring it dead.

This is what I see in Peter’s story, as he waited for Jesus’ trial to end. Maybe it was fear, maybe it was anger, but he denied his belonging to the Jesus movement. He even denied his own Galilean identity. Maybe this is why he cried. Being led by fear, maybe self-hatred, he found himself cut off from what gave him a place to belong.

When I moved to Kansas City for seminary, I began to feel a yearning for all things Puerto Rico. My culture and identity are the foundation of who I am and who God has called me to be. This yearning helped me understand who I was. During winter break after my first semester of seminary, I had the opportunity to go back home. That is where my resurrection began.

Puerto Rico has the longest Christmas season celebration in the world. I think this is because we see in the Christ child an invitation to celebrate who we are. We eat traditional Puerto Rican food, sing traditional Puerto Rican songs, and celebrate our culture. During that Winter Break, while listening to my music and practicing my traditions, I felt an intense sense of pride. I felt joy. I came to see that my culture was not of lesser value. I felt like I finally belonged.

There is Puerto Rican music that still hasn’t found a place in my playlist. But now it is more a matter of taste than value. Recognizing the value of others’ culture and practices is a way of inviting them to the table of belonging. It is our way of saying, “We see you. Christ sees you. He loves you for who you are, and so do we.” Recognizing the beauty that is who we are is a form of resurrection.

PRAYER: God of us all, help me see beauty in other cultures, as they contain the experience of multitudes. Help me also see that same beauty in me. I pray to you for modern-day colonies. Give them the strength to resist. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Learn more about a culture different than yours. What practices do you find particularly beautiful? Learn the purpose and origin of those practices. Finally, answer this question: “What is beautiful about my culture?”

A Community of Strangers & Resurrection

Rev. Justin Hancock

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door, and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves, and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?"

MARK 2:1-8

I am sitting down to write this devotional as October has turned to November. This time of year and the cooler weather always tend to bring this scripture to my mind. Because, in the fall of 2011 my wife and I were involved with a group dedicated to finding new expressions of church in the world. As a part of our involvement, we attended the New Day Communities, which were a network of house churches set up in local apartments in order to be with, among, and in partnership with the African diaspora community.

This scripture always comes to mind for me in relation to this time because the primary community my wife and I attended in New Day was located on the 2nd floor of a Dallas apartment complex. Not a challenge to most people, unless you spend your life as a wheelchair user, as I do. Every week I would get in a manual wheelchair and wait to be carried up the stairs by a young man who came from all parts of the African world. What was so amazing about this is, they did not wait for me to get to know them. This wasn't a practice established after several weeks of cultivating friendship. This happened on day one when my wife and I were known by relatively few community members.

The way in which we normally hear our scripture from Mark chapter 2 interpreted is that the paralysed man was friends with those who lowered him through the roof. However, scripture never says they were friends. Most often it just refers to them as "some people." The first few times that I was carried up the apartment stairs by my fellow community members at New Day, they were strangers to me. Who only knew me as a person drawn to New Day by the power of community through Christ. We became friends because of the connection through Christ and his resurrection. I invite us to realize how much more powerful the story is in today's scripture if the only thing that connects the men involved is being compelled by Christ and Christ's message. What is important to me is that Christ sees the characters involved and recognizes them as a part of God's loving community.

As we move through this Eastertide, I invite you to open the eyes of your heart and consider members of your community as brothers and sisters you have not met yet.

PRAYER: God give us a heart to know people the way that you know them. May our spirit recognize your beloved child in everyone we meet. And help us to draw even the stranger in our lives into your community of belonging and resurrection. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Take a walk in a park in your neighborhood or go to your favorite coffee shop. As you move through these public spaces, spend some time reflecting on one of your favorite scriptures and simply pray for those that you encounter silently and to yourself, unless otherwise invited.

The Ones I Was Told to Fear

Dr. Emma Escobar

“But a Samaritan, while traveling, came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.”

LUKE 10:33-34

I was taught to be afraid of “them.” When I first came to this country as an immigrant, I carried not only my accent and unfamiliarity with the language, but also the fears others placed on me — fears about who was “safe” and who was not. In school, I was kicked out of classrooms for not speaking English, laughed at when I misunderstood assignments, and made to feel as if my presence was a burden. Those moments of humiliation left me questioning my worth and whether I truly belonged in this new place.

But it was “them” — the very people I had been told to fear — who made space for me. They went out of their way to help me understand my homework, volunteered to be my partners in group projects, and treated me with dignity when others would not. When I felt unseen, they saw me. When I felt foreign, they called me friend.

They didn’t ask me to hide my accent or prove that I was “one of the good ones.” They already knew what it meant to be mistrusted, excluded, or feared. And still, they offered friendship without condition. Through them, I saw the gospel come alive — a gospel that welcomes the stranger because they remember what it means to be cast aside.

Today, when I see immigrants detained, Black and Brown people criminalized, and the poor blamed for their poverty, I remember those first faces of belonging. They remind me that God’s kin-dom is not built by those who simply profess faith, but by those who practice it through solidarity. Belonging is not granted by governments or systems — it is born in the spaces where fear is unlearned and love becomes an act of holy resistance.

PRAYER: God of compassion, thank you for the ones the world calls “other.” Teach us to find you in their welcome, their courage, and their love. Help us unlearn fear and build communities where all your children belong. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Begin by challenging the borders within yourself. Read or listen to voices from communities you’ve been taught to fear or misunderstand. Learn their history and stories. Then connect — with humility — with an organization or movement working toward that issue. Let your learning become action, and your action be guided by love.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ♦ *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman
- ♦ *All About Love: New Visions* by bell hooks

Shhh, Not Here: Resurrection Has a Voice

Monalisa Tuitahi

For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.

LUKE 21:15

I learned early on not to use my voice.

Growing up in a large Pacific Island family, an elder's "Shhh, Not Here" with the proverbial index finger held across the lips, was a common sound and sight. As a young immigrant child in grade school, echoes of "Shhh, Not Here" in my mind shielded me from the meanness of a world where immigrant children trying to learn English did not belong. Later on in college, I heard clearly my English professor's "Shhh, Not Here" declaration when he said "you probably will not succeed in law school because English is your second language."

But resurrection has a voice. The young shaky voice of a teenage girl was heard in a family court room in Honolulu, when I was attempting to give voice to my father's inner turmoil with trying to raise children in a new environment and running into a legal system that penalized him for trying to discipline his young son. Though uncertain, my inner voice began to form as a response to a world where we did not belong. Bolstered by earlier immigrants who had settled in Hawaii as sugar plantation workers, my young uncertain voice found solace with other young voices who were sounding a desire to build a bridge from a place of "not belonging" to a place of belonging; from silence to resurrection.

Resurrection has a voice. Thanks to my Christian identity and the values instilled by my Pacific Island elders, my inner voice found strength to say to my professor, "Shhh, Not Ever." A college degree in English and a Juris Doctrate (JD) degree are more than just educational and professional benchmarks. They are merely a part of a bigger unfolding story of God's resurrection power working in and through each of us. A verse from the popular "Hymn of Promises" rings true:

*There's a song in every silence
Seeking word and melody
There's a dawn in every darkness
Bringing hope to you and me*

I am simply at awe. God has given me "words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict." And God has used my voice as a tool to help move others from "not belonging" to "belonging."

"Shhh, Not Ever" because resurrection has a voice!

PRAYER: Lord, I thank you for the voice that you have given me. Help me to use my voice as an instrument of resurrection-- to heal, restore, and inspire hope and reconciliation for you have given me sufficient "words and wisdom" for this work. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Practice using your voice as an instrument of resurrection in your context. Ask God to show you where you need to use your voice, and to give you the words and the wisdom to do so.

What Language Taught Me About Belonging

Dr. Ella Curry

They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road, while he opened the scriptures to us?’

LUKE 24:32

Excitement grew as I entered the gates of a language-learning center located in a beautiful, forested setting. I had signed up for a weeklong immersion experience, understanding it to be a good way to develop speaking skills, vocabulary, and comprehension of the new language I was studying. I also understood that from the time of my arrival through my departure my language of origin, English, would not be spoken outside of special circumstances or emergencies.

Uneasiness replaced excitement after I completed registration but could not find the way to my dorm. I smiled at people as I walked along the paths, hesitating to even try asking for help. Finally, I stopped a young woman and pointed to the name of my dorm, and she led me to its front door. Thank heaven I was confident saying “Thank you” in this new language.

Following dinner, the first presentation of the week, and receipt of our schedule, I was overwhelmed. People all around me were pleasant, but I felt like the only one who could not really join in conversations. Persuading myself that I was just tired from travel, I headed to my room to unpack and try to get a good night’s sleep. But the mantra running through my head persisted: “I don’t belong here.”

Of note, I had taken a pre-immersion test that established my status as a Beginner; my three-times-daily classes would be with other Beginners. The next morning, we discovered there were only three of us and we quickly bonded. Our teachers were skilled in gentle persuasions and encouragements to “Just try and we’ll help each other.” Our learning was filled with laughter, funny mistakes, and red-faced moments as word patterns and sounds became more familiar each day. Yet I struggled with deep-seated insecurity that I was in over my head and did not belong here.

Did I make it through the week? Yes. Did I learn more of this new language? Yes. Did I meet people who will continue to be friends? Yes. However, what I really learned that week was totally unexpected.

I learned the feeling of profound isolation amid a group of good-willed people that I could not understand in conversation and with whom I could not communicate. I learned how much I take for granted every day, never having to think twice about having a language to communicate my thoughts, my worries, or my impressions of people and things that are new and different to me. And then I recognized that throughout my brief experience I always had access to a way out of isolation by blurting out my distress using my language of origin.

To this day I am grateful for this poignant experience and its lessons of language isolation and not belonging. I experienced briefly, and only remotely, the isolation that may accompany many of our siblings who arrive in our country, our neighborhoods, and our churches, seeking refuge, community, and belonging in the face of challenging language barriers.

PRAYER: Wise and loving God, as I strive to give thanks in all things, I am grateful today for experiences that surprise and enlighten me even as I struggle. I pray for wisdom to look and listen

for the many things that erect language barriers between us. Grant us courage to speak and act together toward essential changes that foster belonging in beloved communities by learning to truly accommodate all voices in all places that we meet each other. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING:

- ♦ When we fail to see siblings in “others” who do not share our dominant language, we erect barriers to their belonging.
- ♦ May we open our eyes to the daily realities of language barriers. May we use our imaginations to discern our siblings’ struggles so that we may transform expectations into realistic actions that make one aspect of belonging possible.

I Did Baptism Wrong, in the Right Church

James Kang

Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

JOHN 3:5

It was a day or so after conducting my first baptism as a licensed local pastor and the name on the incoming call was a leader of the church. Those of us who know would know what this means.

Sure enough, after a little bit of small talk, she said, “Well, I wanted to share with you a little bit about what some of the church members were saying about the baptism this past Sunday.”

“Oh, really? Okay, yeah... what are they saying?” I asked.

“Well, some of the members are saying that the way that you did baptism was kind of... cold,” she answered.

“Hmm... cold... do you mean, emotionally?” I asked.

“Yeah... because when you were doing the baptism, you did not ask her parents and family to stand behind her or next to her. She was by herself,” she said.

I thought about it for a second and, yes, that is exactly what happened. In trying to get everything else right and not commit ministerial malpractice, I totally forgot to ask them to come around and be right next to her. What made it worse was that the person who was baptized was a child and the “family” we were talking about was her parents.

“Oh, that’s right... I totally... missed that,” I said.

“Yes, now, Pastor, I want to just ask you a question. How many baptisms have you done before this one?” she asked.

I paused for a moment before I said, “none.”

We both started laughing.

Honestly, I do not really remember what we talked about after that. But, this leader of the church that I was talking with was 80 years old. This was a mostly elderly African American congregation and I was a Korean American pastor in his 20’s. And, she was gentle, respectful, and most of all inclusive – making space for the pastor to experience a genuine sense of belonging.

Like how water does in baptism, race, ethnicity, and culture are all things that shape a life of faith in Jesus Christ for any and every congregation. These are the colors of the kaleidoscope through which we can see glimpses of the Spirit that is in and among us all. When we can acknowledge that it is the visible and the tangible that shows us the beauty of the Spirit that enlivens all of us, we can experience the belonging that God provides for us all.

PRAYER: God of all colors, show me what I had not seen before. Lead me to a place of openness to learn and try what is new, different, and important for those who see things differently. And, invite me into meeting your people with whom this can happen in the most gentle of ways. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: As we see things that we had not seen before, let the Spirit bring to mind those whom we can now learn to receive and accept whom we could not do before. Be open to learning something new from them in this season.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ◆ [Vital Conversations Video Series](#)
- ◆ [Baptism and the Call to Justice](#)

The Chosen Child

Christina Yates

“The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever.”

JOHN 8:35

“For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!””

ROMAN 8:15

When I was a small child my parents told me that I was adopted. They explained that this meant that they were not my “birth parents”. However, they went on to say that I was a precious, chosen gift sent by God to fill our home with more love. Although the topic of my adoption sometimes came up in conversation with friends and relatives, I can honestly say that my Mom, Dad and Brother always made me feel as though I always belonged in this family. My childhood was filled with happiness and joy being raised in a home filled with love and laughter. I never felt like an outsider. As I grew older I even felt a sense of gratitude for my birth parents who loved me enough to give me up so that I could be raised in a loving, nurturing home environment. The journey through childhood and adolescence was accompanied by moments of indecisiveness, anxiety and stress. However, through each growth experience I was surrounded by love, hugs and understanding. Now, as a young adult I often look back and count my blessings.

The year of 2023 was filled with moments of quiet reflection. On my birthday my parents gifted me with a special book entitled “We Chose You” which was filled with written messages, pictures taken over the years of me and my circle of family and friends. Like the character in the book, I delight in the fact that I was a “chosen child”. Less than two months after receiving this special gift, my father passed away. As a “Daddy’s girl” my heart was broken and his passing left a huge void in my world. However, when I feel sad I find comfort and take pride in knowing that I was a chosen part of the legacy of love, kindness and devotion he left to me, my mom and the rest of the family. God brought us together in a way that only He can orchestrate and I am truly thankful.

PRAYER: Dear God, thank You for Your mercy and rescue.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Be intentional in creating an inclusive space for all. Ensure that children feel a strong sense of belonging and receive the love, guidance, and opportunities they need to thrive.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ♦ [25 Traits of The Beloved Community](#)

Belonging and Believing

Rev. Enger Muteteke

But Thomas (who was called the Twin[a]), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

JOHN 20:24-29

As I write this reflection, the back-to-school season has been underway for three weeks. This time of year always stirs my own school memories—especially of college. Twenty-five years ago, I was blessed to gain admission to my top choice, the College of William and Mary – a school that is predominantly white. In Williamsburg, Virginia, the beauty of all four seasons unfolds, but autumn, with its vibrant yellows and oranges, also carried a haunting question for me as a freshman:

Do I belong here?

I had been eager to start college, meet new people, and learn new things. Yet, soon after arriving, excitement gave way to confusion and doubt. I wondered again and again, Do I really belong? I imagine the disciple Thomas wrestled with a similar feeling when he missed Jesus’ first resurrection appearance. When the other disciples shared their experience, Thomas resisted, insisting, “Unless I see the nail marks, I will not believe.” His words echo my own freshman struggle. I, too, questioned whether I belonged anywhere. Quietly, I resisted the idea that Jesus’ presence was with me until I could see and feel belonging within a community.

When Jesus returned a week later, Thomas was present. This time, Jesus came directly to him—showing his scars and speaking to the unbelief within him. Isn’t that just like God? The risen Christ does not require us to believe before we belong. Instead, Jesus comes again and again, meeting us where we are, offering what we need to see in order to believe and belong—both in Him and in community.

I discovered belonging during my first year in unexpected places: in the gospel choir, with my roommate whose life was so different from mine yet grounded in shared values, and in long faith-filled conversations with hallmates from diverse backgrounds. In each of these spaces, Jesus’ presence was revealed—not because I went searching, but because Jesus came and met me.

PRAYER: God of Belonging and Believing, work in me patience with myself and others who struggle with discerning your presence in new places. Give me courage to enter new communities and build new relationships so I can meet you anew. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Just as Jesus returned for Thomas, consider how you might return to someone who feels left out. Send a message, make an invitation, or simply listen. Small acts create sacred spaces of belonging.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ♦ [What Is Belonging?](#)
- ♦ [The Role of Religion in Bridging Work – Othering & Belonging Institute](#)
- ♦ [Caroline Clarke: The Essential Power of Belonging – TED Talk](#)

When the Spirit Speaks

Rev. Rachel Ringlaben

“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...”

ACTS 2:17

During my time living in Ecuador as a lay missionary, I traveled along the coast with my ministry team, visiting congregations to encourage them in their work. Each week, one of us would preach—and when we arrived in Machala, the banana capital of Latin America, it was my turn.

That evening, our host family welcomed us around the dinner table. But as conversation unfolded, the father began quoting scripture about why women shouldn't teach or preach. His words stung. I felt small, silenced before I even opened my mouth. That night, I sat alone with my Bible, questioning God's call. Could God really use me here? But then I read Jeremiah 1:5: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you...” The Divine Breath whispered peace into my mind.

The next day, I stood before the congregation and preached on Ephesians 2:14: “Christ is our peace.” I spoke of the One who dismantles the walls of hatred and hostility we build between one another, who makes us one through the cross. As I finished, the other invited preacher—a man—rose slowly and said, “I have nothing to add. The Spirit has already spoken.”

By the end of the week, the host father who once questioned my presence and call, thanked me for preaching and said he would be honored if I would return to preach someday. Something had shifted. The wall in his hearts—built by tradition, fear, and exclusion—had begun to crumble under the weight of peace.

Five years later, I was invited back to preach again—this time on the raising of Lazarus. As I proclaimed resurrection over a community that had once doubted my voice, I felt the Spirit breathing life into places that had long been closed off. It was more than a return. It was redemption. A full-circle moment where the Divine Breath whispered again: “See? I am still making all things new.”

PRAYER: Spirit of the Living God, always make us aware of your Divine Breath. Help always heed the continual call of the One who called us. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Like the crowd at Pentecost, we often doubt the Spirit could speak through the unexpected. But the miracle isn't just in fire and wind—it's in hearts transformed, in voices once dismissed now declaring God's truth.

Think back to a time you felt underestimated. What if the Spirit was speaking through you then? This week, listen for that breath—and dare to share your story.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ♦ *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* by Justo L. González

A Cup of Connection

Rev. Leo Cunningham

An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, “At noon, take[a] the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.) So he did. Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace. (Candace is the title given to the Ethiopian queen.) He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. The Spirit told Philip, “Approach this carriage and stay with it.”

Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you really understand what you are reading?”

The man replied, “Without someone to guide me, how could I?” Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him.

ACTS 8:26-31

At its very best, a local coffee shop should be a place of belonging and acceptance. Hopefully, at its worst, it is just a place of neutrality. Each year, an event invites people to venture out and support locally owned coffee shops. It is the annual CoffeeQuest 419. This was my first year in a new pastoral appointment, and I felt it was a good way to learn the area. I had visited some of the places before the start of this year’s quest. However, this local coffee shop was new to me. This means an unknown menu and different seating. As an African American man, I survey my surroundings, especially in a new environment. That was where I met John for the first time. He was an older European American man sitting at a long wooden table. He looked up as I walked past him and gave me a nod. I nodded back.

After a long study of the menu, I placed my specialty coffee order. Once the barista handed it to me, I turned to find a seat. The only available seat was at the other end of the long table opposite John. As I sat down, took out my phone, went to the CoffeeQuest 419 app, and mumbled, “Another place off the list.” “Are you on the Quest?” he asked, his voice rough but not loud. I hesitated for a moment because years of experience had taught me to be cautious and aware in unfamiliar spaces with new faces. But something about that morning, and that man’s question, invited trust.

I affirmed that I was on the quest, and we began to discuss where we had been and where we still needed to go to complete the challenge of purchasing all 29 spots. What began as a simple exchange of pleasantries soon deepened. We spoke of family and faith. He shared stories of growing up in a different time in Northwest Ohio, of mistakes made and lessons learned. I listened, and then I offered my own stories. I talked about being in a new city because I was a United Methodist pastor. John is Catholic and had a few questions. In that conversation, he learned of our free store to the public. He asked how he, a Roman Catholic, could help the Protestant, “feed the hungry and clothe the naked.” A week later, he brought 50 Manna bags to the church. (A Manna Bag contains a protein, a fruit, a carb, a dessert, and a bottle of water.)

In that hour, we became more than strangers. We became two men, each carrying our own histories, finding common ground in vulnerability. For me, it was a living testimony to the truth

Paul writes about in Galatians: “There is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Our belonging was not just in the coffee shop, but in the heart of God, who calls us to love beyond barrier, and invites us to go from inclusion to belonging.

PRAYER: God of connection and community, thank You for your Spirit that connect all your creation across time, space, culture, and nation. Thank you that we are one in Jesus Christ because of Your divine, sacrificial love. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: This week, I challenge us to take a risk on connection. Sit with someone you might otherwise pass by. Listen deeply, share honestly, and let your guard down for just a moment. In doing so, we honor the image of God in each other and become, even for a moment, truly at home.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ◆ [The Next Level of Belonging: A Culture of Connection](#)
- ◆ [The Business Case For Belonging And Connection At Work](#)
- ◆ [What Is Belonging?](#)

Forming New Patterns

25

Dr. Akuoma Nwadike

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

ROMANS 12:2

In 2022, I planned my first solo international trip, to Scotland. I had recently watched a show set in the Scottish Highlands, and I had to go. I planned a five-day itinerary that included a three-day guided bus tour of the Highlands. My excitement was tempered by my apprehension. Apprehension about what? White people.

I was going to be on a three-day adventure with strangers who I understood would be almost all, if not all, white in a new country of white people. I wanted to have a game plan, anticipating a new type of racism. I would have my headphones on to protect me, speaking only when I needed to, but determined to shrink into myself, not drawing additional attention or potential ire to the presence of my Blackness.

I have no idea why I thought this would work. I am personable. I speak to people. At our first lunch stop, I wanted to try authentic Scottish food. I asked the tour guide about something and made a joke; everyone laughed. Why? I had a heavy “American” accent. I became the American girl for the rest of the trip. For the first time in my life, I wasn’t a hyphen-American; I was simply American. At their declaration of my Americanness, I finally looked past all the whiteness of my travel group and listened to them. I heard the accents. I was American because they were all from other countries too. So, while I was the only Black person, I was part of this international tapestry and fit right in. By Day 3, I was sharing WhatsApp information with my new acquaintances, and some, like Leti who I sat next to daily on the bus, I now call “friend.”

I was so prepared for prejudice that I preempted it with my own. But what I experienced led to a sense of belonging to my country that I rarely experience in my country. It changed me, so instead of conforming to what the U.S. had made me come to expect from all white people, I became a world traveler, hitting multiple white-majority countries to counter that expectation.

My Scottish adventure helped me more positively intertwine my Black and American identities: this Scottish test unlocked a new will God had for me that was transformative to my identity development and would never again make me feel stifled by my Blackness.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for the gift of discernment in Your perfect timing, and I ask that You are patient with those whose experiences, especially trauma, may cloud their receipt and use of this gift, and help them find their way to its freeing powers. Through it, they will find You and a greater capacity for hope and love, and trust in humanity, the same way You trust us. In Your name I pray, Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Consider a way you may be similar to someone who you presume to have nothing in common with. Expand your capacity for what you think can connect you with/ to someone.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ♦ [Identity Politics and Social Location](#)
- ♦ [“Implicit Bias: What We Don’t Think We Think”](#) online course

ALL BELONG

Rev. Alka Lyall

We have many parts in one body, but the parts don't all have the same function. In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other.

ROMANS 12:4

None of the girls I generally hung out with, came to school that day. It did not pose any challenges for the first half of school day but became a crisis during lunch break for me as a ninth grader. I scanned the space and found a group I thought would be welcoming. And they were, until one of them started to speak, then stopped mid-sentence, looked directly at me, and told me to leave, because "I was not IN their group," and they needed to discuss something they didn't want 'others' to hear.

I started to leave but Julia got up, pushed me back down and said, "She will not leave. If we need to change the conversation, we can, but she will stay! She belongs too!" I thanked Julia for her welcome and excused myself.

The incidence made the rest of the day challenging for me but it also formed me and taught me a lesson I never forgot- to always include people who might otherwise feel excluded. And even though I did not understand it then, as a young person, but I know now, that day Julia embodied the welcome of God for me. She did what all of us are called to do- as images of God in this world- to remind everyone that they BELONG just as much as anyone else! Learning from the experience, I try to acknowledge people I see on the side-walks, outside stores, or just hanging in the alleys- look them in their eyes and smile, share a greeting with them and even stop to chat if I can.

bell hooks in her book, 'Belonging: A Culture of Place,' says, "I dreamed about a culture of belonging. I still dream that dream. I contemplate what our lives would be like if we knew how to cultivate awareness, to live mindfully, peacefully; if we learned habits of being that would bring us closer together, that would help us build beloved community."

Beloveds, like bell hooks, I do believe that if we remember that we are all a part of one big human family, we indeed will build the beloved community we long for, and God desires for us.

PRAYER: God, thank you for creating us and claiming us as yours. Help me to reflect Your radical love everywhere and always. May my belonging to You overflow into loving others, so they find their hope and home in you. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Acknowledge the people you encounter today- at work or stores- look them in the eye, smile and greet them.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ◆ [What Is Beloved Community?](#)
- ◆ *Belonging: A Culture of Place* by bell hooks

Belonging and Resisting

Rev. Enger Muteteke

“Do not be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.”

ROMANS 12:21

Disciples of Jesus from different denominations gathered from across the United States in Washington, DC to march for immigrant justice on February 25, 2026. People traveled from near and far to lend their feet, bodies, hands, minds, and hearts in solidarity with immigrants being dehumanized and denigrated by our current administration. I have felt angry, sad, and resolute since the beginning of the second term of the U.S. president. But more than this, I have been determined to remain faithful to God’s call to justice for my neighbors and to demonstrate God’s call to faithful love in real time.

During this season, I have also been reflecting on my own faith and the practice of dying to my selfish agendas as a disciple of Jesus, so that I might rise to God’s agenda for all humanity—honoring the *imago Dei* in one another. I am learning at a deeper level that this honoring calls me not to use the tools of this world to defeat evil. Instead, it calls me to rely on the powerful and just love of God and neighbor.

This kind of faithful and just love is not easy, and it cannot be practiced alone. It calls all of us—the entire human community—to live as the Beloved Community: belonging to one another, marching with one another, working together, and collaborating in doing God’s justice and loving mercy in God’s world. This is the way all will belong. This is the way we resist and defeat evil in Jesus’ name.

PRAYER: God of faithful belonging and faithful resisting, thank you for holding all of us. When the systems and tools of this world—and the people who lead them—fail us, remind us that we have access to your divine tools of resistance and belong to a kin-dom with no borders. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Identify one person in your community, home, or church who may feel discouraged or overwhelmed by the current climate of injustice. Reach out to them—through a conversation, a prayer, or an act of support—and remind them they are not alone. Practice belonging by standing with them in hope and committing together to one small act of justice or compassion this week.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ◆ [God With Us: Advent Promises For A Just World \(Year C\)](#)
- ◆ [Vital Conversations on Immigration](#)
- ◆ [Faithful Resistance](#)

One in the Spirit

Rev. Joanne Hus

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-13, 26

The longer I walk this path of discipleship, the more I am convinced that all people are literally one, with each other and with God the Living Presence. This is not something one learns through experience per se; rather it seems to be by dwelling in the Living Presence that we come to intuit this truth. And the closer one draws to the Living Presence, the more one falls in love with God. And one cannot fall in love with God without also falling in love with all of humankind. It's a package deal.

The first time I felt an inkling of this I was running some errands at the local shopping mall. I remember walking past JC Penny when suddenly I felt as if my heart were connected to the heart of every single person I saw, and there were hundreds on the concourse that day. I wanted to weep for joy, but I choked back the tears wondering what on earth was the matter with me. The sensation was abrupt and overwhelming, as if I had just imbibed a love potion and instead of falling in love with the first person I saw, I fell in love with all of them. Old people. Young people. Quiet people. Loud people. Polite people. Rude people. Didn't matter. Loved them all.

In the decades since, I've experienced this state several times, usually in crowds or on public transit. A few times I've felt it while stuck in traffic. While in seminary a few years ago, I experienced this state frequently, almost daily. I'd be riding on the subway and sometimes the love I felt was so intense that it was all I could do to keep myself from shouting out loud, "I LOVE YOU ALL, BEAUTIFUL HUMANS!" I may have been physically silent, but I was certainly shouting it within.

As I continue listening to the Spirit, it's becoming clearer and clearer to me that all human beings are connected to one another in a very real way. What harms one of us harms all of us. What heals one of us heals all of us. The Kin(g)dom can only come if all of us are included.

PRAYER: God of Inclusion, help me to recognize every person that I see as your beloved child and my beloved sibling. Open my heart to all, that I may feel connected to them through you. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Scripture reminds us that if one member of the body suffers, all suffer together with it; and if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Consider sharing your concerns and your joys with someone and invite them to share theirs. A joy shared is that much sweeter, and a concern shared makes the burden that much lighter.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ◆ [Imago Dei - A Lectio Divina Bible Study of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#)
- ◆ [What Is Belonging?](#)
- ◆ [Belong resources from Discipleship Ministries](#)

Still Belonging: Strength Found in Weakness

29

Roella Marcelle Bautista

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). I did not fully understand this verse until weakness became something I could no longer ignore.

I grew up in the church. It shaped my faith, my values, and much of who I am today. Because of that nurturing community, I learned early what it meant to belong. Yet in 2021, that sense of belonging was quietly tested. I noticed changes in my body – my legs thinning, my strength fading. After consultations with several specialists, I received a diagnosis I never expected: muscular dystrophy, a progressive condition with no cure and a disability I would carry for life.

Fear came naturally. I worried about my future, my mobility, and the life I had carefully planned. But even in that uncertainty, doubt never overtook my faith. What surprised me most was not the diagnosis, but the way grace met me through people. My family adjusted without hesitation, attentive and loving. My work colleagues offered understanding rather than limitation. And in church – the place I wondered most if I would still fit – I was not pushed aside. I was still invited to lead, to serve, and to offer my gifts. Accommodations were made quietly, without making me feel less capable or less whole.

There are moments when pity stings more than pain – when people say, “ang bata niya pa, sayang naman (she is so young, what a pity).” Yet even in those moments, I cling to God’s promise. I have felt weak, afraid, frustrated, and sad – but never alone. In my weakness, I have witnessed God’s strength made visible through a community that chooses inclusion over exclusion.

Still, belonging does not absolve us from the call to justice. The grace I have received compels me to look beyond my own experience and recognize how many people with disabilities remain unseen, unheard, and unsupported. Grace calls us to truly live out inclusion, by boldly lobbying the strengthening of people with disability (PWD) rights, benefits, and meaningful participation within the Church and beyond it. To make the world more welcoming and conducive for all people is to proclaim resurrection with our lives, declaring that everybody, every story, and every life belongs in God’s household.

This Easter season reminds me that resurrection is not only about life after death but about renewed life now. As Christ rose, barriers were broken. And each day, by God’s sufficient grace, I am given the chance to rise again – to live, serve, and belong fully, just as I am.

PRAYER: Gracious God, thank you for meeting us in our weakness and surrounding us with love that restores dignity and hope. Teach us to trust your sufficient grace each day. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: This week, notice someone whose weakness or difference is often overlooked. Choose one concrete way to affirm their belonging – through listening, accommodation, or invitation, and reflect on how God’s grace is revealed through that act.

The House with the Open Door

Pastor Robin Fillmore, PhD

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

GALATIANS 6:2

Growing up, I lived a block away from Immaculate Heart of Mary school and church, but my family was the neighborhood outlier. Every Sunday, while my friends were “dashing off” to Mass—which always seemed suspiciously shorter than our services—we piled into the car for a two-mile trek to the United Methodist church.

In our corner of the suburbs, Catholicism felt like the baseline for stability: a world of Notre Dame football, moms and dads (and lots of kids) home every night, and a predictable rhythm of bike races and evening hide-and-seek games until the streetlights went on.

Then came the day the rhythm broke.

I remember the living room couch, my parents’ tear-filled eyes, and the words that changed everything: Mom will still be Mom, and Dad will still be Dad, but Dad won’t be living here anymore. At eleven years old, I entered a fog. More than the sadness, I felt a crushing weight of shame. I couldn’t imagine saying the word “divorce” to my friends, whose families seemed like unbreakable icons.

But grace showed up next door in the form of Amy and Pat Panella, parents of my best friend, Linda. They didn’t need a formal announcement to understand the situation. Without asking for explanations, they simply called me over, day after day. They offered me a place to play, a seat at their table, and biscotti fresh from the oven.

When my own home felt like it was dissolving, the Panellas provided the first real sense of belonging I ever knew. They were my “surrogate parents,” offering a fully-immersive hug and a love that required no prerequisites. They have long since passed into glory, but I thank God for the way they kept their door—and their hearts—wide open.

PRAYER: Gracious God, thank You for the “surrogate” saints who stand in the gap whenever our world feels fractured. Teach me to be a refuge for others, offering a warm smile and an open door to those who are carrying silent burdens. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Identify one person—perhaps a neighbor, a coworker, or a young person—who seems to be in a “fog” of transition or isolation.

Reach out with a low-pressure invitation. It doesn’t have to be a four-course meal; it can be a cup of coffee, a simple snack, or even just a text that says, “I’m thinking of you and my door is always open.” Aim to offer “belonging” without requiring “explanation.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ◆ [Ana Cejudo-Levia: The Things Humans do for Love and Connection – TED Talk](#)
- ◆ [Rita Pierson: Every Child Needs a Champion – TED Talk](#)

Beyond the Hustle: “Get In Where You Fit In” vs. True Belonging

Dion Roberts

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,

EPHESIANS 2:14

The phrase, “Get in Where You Fit in”, was heavily popularized by West Coast hip hop culture in the early 1990’s. In that context, the phrase was mostly about seizing opportunity and finding a lane in the ‘street game’ where you could actually compete in. At its core, the phrase means to adapt to your environment. I spent a large chapter of my life governed by this simple unspoken rule. At first, I thought this was wisdom. To me, it meant being a survivor. It meant walking into a room, a job, or a new circle of people and immediately reading the room. I would look for the gaps in the conversation, the specific way people dressed, and the unwritten codes of how they acted. Once I found the shape of the group, I would adjust my own edges to match.

I became pretty good at adjusting my own edges. If a circle was tight, I would make myself small. If a group was loud, I would turn up my volume. I was “getting in,” and on the surface, it looked like success. I had a seat at the table; I had a spot in the circle. But there is a hidden tax on “fitting in”, and that is, you can lose yourself. The more I “got in where I fit in,” the more I realized I was leaving the real version of myself at the door. The influence of that saying had turned my life into a series of auditions. I was constantly performing, conforming, and sacrificing my true self to be valid and relevant, and constantly terrified that if I stopped adjusting, I would no longer fit. This hustle was exhausting.

I got “in”, but did I “belong”? True belonging doesn’t ask that I change my shape; it celebrates it. I had been influenced by the hustle to fit, but I was being called to the peace of being chosen. I realized that because I was “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139), then any space that required me to sand down my edges wasn’t a space God intended for me to stay in. These days, I am shifting from a life of ‘fitting in’—which is about performance—to a life of ‘belonging,’ which is about being fully seen and fully accepted. I’m trading the survival of “getting in” for the security of “staying in.” I’m learning that I don’t have to find where I fit, because God has already reserved my spot by name.

PRAYER: Lord, please open my eyes to see those who feel invisible and open my heart to those who feel alone. Help me to be a bridge, not a barrier so that everyone I encounter feels truly seen, heard and valued. Teach me how to love without judgement.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Maybe you’re tired of the hustle, too. Remember this: Fitting in is about changing who you are to be accepted which makes us work to belong. True belonging is about being accepted for who you already are which brings peace of mind.

Walls Will Fall

Rev. Kiboko Kiboko

“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

EPHESIANS 2:14

In 1990, my wife and I searched for a church home, a place where we could belong, worship, and serve. We visited a United Methodist church where, for two weeks, no one greeted us. On our third visit, several people said, “There is a black church next town, don’t you think you will be comfortable there?”

Those words pierced deeply. We could have walked away, but God’s Spirit whispered, “Stay”. So, we did. Week after week, we kept showing up, not out of anger, but out of quiet faith that God was still at work. Slowly, the atmosphere began to change. God healed our hearts, teaching us to forgive, and God healed the congregation, helping them see us as one family in Christ.

In time, relationships grew, trust deepened, and love replaced fear. To my astonishment, later I was invited to serve as the church’s youth leader, the same congregation that once turned us away. Only God could do that. On that journey, I saw the power of resurrection, Jesus tearing down walls that divide people and creating something new in their place.

Ephesians 2 reminds us that Jesus is our peace. Through him, hatred turns into kindness, and those who once felt left out are welcomed in. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead still brings healing and new life to broken communities today.

PRAYER: Loving God, you are our peace. Tear down every wall that divides us and heal both the wounds of rejection and the fear that keeps us apart. Build in us a community of grace where everyone belongs. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Think about someone who might feel left out. How can you be a blessing to them? You can start by praying for them. You might also try to reach out by taking one small step toward them: say hello, start a conversation, or invite them to coffee.

Act Well Your Part

Rev. Zach Anderson

Don't lie to each other. Take off the old human nature with its practices and put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it. In this image there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all things and in all people.

COLOSSIANS 3:9-11

Since I was young, I've always been busy. In school I participated in almost everything: music, sports, speech, student government and clubs, part-time jobs, church youth group, and theater. I was never short on being around people or having a project or activity to be involved in, but at some point, I discovered "doing" all the things and truly having a community of people you belonged to were two very different things. In fact, many times I couldn't shake the strong feeling of loneliness in the midst of the crowds for a long time in my youth. While I was doing all these things, no singular thing was my complete focus. Many of my peers were super involved as well, but most had their one sport or activity that was what they were known for and created their community around. Not me, at least not right away.

Eventually I did discover that place, and it was in the theater. I got involved with theater classes in the summer between my first and second grade years because my grandmother made me. I did as I was told. Eventually, it became my summer ritual, the thing I looked forward to. Finally, in high school, I found my people. Lots of different students came and went through the department at times, but there was a core of us that were there for every season and show. Those were my people. As I think about why, it seems simple now, but then it just happened. In hindsight, it's because we were all so different in so many ways, but had that common love to bring a story to life for an audience, to try out different ways to portray a character, to be something else or be somewhere else. In those late nights and early mornings during show prep, it took everyone to pull it off - big parts and small. We needed each other to reach our goal, to create a space for the audience to escape and feel good about the world.

To me, that's who the church can be at its best. The place where people who are so different in so many ways can come together because something bigger than them draws them in. It takes all of us to do our best at any given moment to make the world come alive. Sometimes we play a big role, and others are supporting players. But no matter what, we are essential to the whole thing.

PRAYER: Gracious and loving God, create in me a sense of exploration to find my place in the world that brings me alive. Help me discover how I can be a part of something that brings people together, creates new possibilities, and reflects the amazing diversity you have envisioned and created. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: Dedicate some time to explore a new activity or place where you'll interact with people you don't know or work with regularly. To take it up a step, make this new activity a service project or volunteering so you serve with new people while expanding your circle.

Living as a Sojourner

Rev. Hung Su Lim

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

HEBREWS 11:13-14

I love the word sojourner. It reminds us that faith is often filled with mystery and questions. Abraham and Sarah lived as sojourners, strangers, and foreigners on the earth, just as we sometimes feel. What does it mean for us to walk by faith as sojourners today?

When I first came to the United States to study, I arrived with only \$500 in my pocket. I was a stranger and a foreigner, with no family or friends, unsure of how to find my place. Sundays were especially hard because I did not know which church to attend or where I might belong. Each week, I longed for a sense of welcome and community.

After my first semester, I needed to find an internship. I sent my résumé and personal statement to several churches, hoping someone would welcome me. At last, one congregation invited me to interview.

I will never forget the first words the pastor said: “I have been praying for someone like you. You are the one I have been praying for.” At that moment, I felt noticed and comforted. Even before I arrived, God was already at work.

Though I was a stranger, I encountered God’s unexpected grace. At the church, my new faith journey began with love and care from people who shared God’s heart.

Abraham and Sarah knew what it was to be strangers and foreigners. They wandered in a land that was not their own, leaving behind all that was familiar because God called them. They followed, not knowing exactly where they were going, but trusting that God would lead them. They held everything with open hands, believing that all belonged to God.

Their daily questions were not very different from ours: What will we eat? What will we drink? Where will we sleep? Yet as sojourners, they learned to trust and depend on God. Faith invites us to trust God’s provision and guidance, even when we fail to see the way ahead.

Living as sojourners opens our eyes to others who feel like outsiders. In Genesis 18, Abraham saw three strangers passing by and ran to greet them. Sarah and he offered generous hospitality, perhaps because they remembered what it was like to be strangers themselves. When we live as sojourners, we remember that all we have is a gift from God. We hold our possessions, our positions, and our plans with open hands, ready to follow when the Spirit calls. We become more attentive to the needs around us, and in this way,

God uses us to bless others and bring hope to the world. God promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the shore. That kind of abundance comes through love, such love that welcomes, shares, and trusts. To live as sojourners is to walk by faith, to depend on God, and to become a channel of God’s blessing wherever we go.

PRAYER: Gracious God, you call us to live by faith as pilgrims and sojourners. Teach us to trust your provision when the way feels unsure. Open our eyes to strangers who need welcome and

care. Free us from clinging to what is not truly ours, and help us to become a blessing in every place you send us. In Christ's name, Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: This week, you're invited to notice someone who may feel like a stranger, at church, at work, or in your neighborhood. Reach out with a word of welcome. Offer hospitality, whether it is a meal, a listening ear, or an invitation to community. As you do, remember your own journey and let it shape the way you welcome others.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ♦ [Service of Holy Communion – Care of the Sojourner and Stranger](#)

Finding Home Far From Home

Jeehye Kim

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

HEBREWS 13:2

I was in my early twenties when I boarded a plane to Mexico City for a study-abroad semester. I had never been to the country, barely spoke the language, and didn't know a single person waiting for me after immigration. I arrived two days before my school group...confident, excited, and honestly, totally unprepared in the way only a college student can be.

The moment I stepped out of the airport, reality hit me hard. I was suddenly very aware that I was alone in one of the biggest cities in the world with no place to stay and no plan for what to do next. I must have looked completely lost because an airport employee approached me with so much gentleness. I tried to explain, in my very broken Spanish, that I needed a hostel for the night. They didn't just point me somewhere; they found a nearby hostel and even accompanied me all the way there to make sure I arrived safely. Their kindness was unexpected and overwhelming. It was my first taste of the hospitality that would shape the rest of my time in Mexico.

My homestay families deepened that experience. From the moment I stepped into their homes, they welcomed me like I was a long-lost relative. No hesitation, no tests, no need to prove anything. That sense of home allowed me to breathe, study, explore, and actually enjoy being there. Later, when a new friend invited me to their family's home, I felt that same warmth again. Their family treated me with such love and welcome, as if I'd always belonged there.

These moments changed me. They expanded the way I understood community, welcome, and human dignity. I realized that belonging isn't something we earn; it's something we're gifted. And through each of these encounters, I caught a glimpse of God's own welcome—the kind that doesn't measure our worth but loves us simply because we exist.

PRAYER: God of every place and people, Thank you for the unexpected kindnesses that remind us we are never truly alone. Teach us to welcome others with the same generosity we have received—open-hearted, attentive, and full of grace. Help us create spaces where strangers become guests and guests become family. Amen.

PRACTICE OF BELONGING: This week, intentionally offer welcome to someone who may be new, quiet, or on the margins. A greeting, a seat saved, a genuine invitation can change everything.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

- ◆ *Extraordinary Hospitality (for Ordinary People): Seven Ways to Welcome Like Jesus* by Carolyn Lacey
- ◆ *The Art of Receiving and Giving: The Power of Hospitality* by Christine Pohl



General Commission on
RELIGION & RACE

www.gcorr.org

© GCORR Eastertide Devotional