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Belonging: How the Gospel Answers Our Deepest Longing

Union with Christ, Grace & Love of God, Cross & Atonement

Human beings carry a deep, restless longing for wholeness, belonging, and a life that truly satisfies—and our best attempts to meet that longing on our own terms always fall short.

In the Luke 17 sermon, Pastor Brant describes watching a documentary about the French alpinist Benjamin Vedrines, who climbed Broad Peak in just seven hours and twenty-eight minutes and stood at the summit in a moment of intense euphoria. Vedrines said, 'I told myself, that's it. I could be satisfied with this for the rest of my days.' The interviewer asked how long that feeling lasted. His answer: 'about 38 minutes, as long as the flight down to the bottom of the valley.' The moment he landed, he looked up the valley, saw K2, and was already chasing the next shadow. The documentary is aptly named Chasing Shadows.

This image captures something universal. Claudia's testimony at the Easter gathering describes a similar sequence: after achieving corporate success—the job, the home, the car, the luxury vacations—she was 'miserable and extremely confused as to why.' She cycled through New Age spirituality, Eastern mysticism, crystals, breathwork, and psychedelics, calling it 'an endless cycle of temporary fixes that left me empty.' Emily's testimony echoes the same pattern: years of chasing

fulfillment through sex, alcohol, drugs, and New Age manifestation practices, all while 'refusing to admit how empty and alone I felt.' The Advent sermon gives the theological frame: our desires are leading us somewhere, but they are pointing to God. As Augustine wrote, and Pastor Brant quotes in the Luke 17 sermon, 'Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee, O Lord.'

The question the Luke 17 text puts to every listener is direct: when God comes to us in his mercy, will we accept his gifts and press on in a hopeless quest for joy somewhere else, or will we recognize that Jesus himself is the answer to our hungry and thirsty souls?

- Where in your own life have you experienced the feeling that something is still missing even after getting what you wanted?
- The Luke 17 sermon describes the alpinist Benjamin Vedrines whose summit euphoria lasted only 38 minutes before he was already eyeing the next mountain—how does that image resonate with your own pursuit of satisfaction?
- The Easter sermon describes the 'gray death of the cold winter of this world'—what winters of the soul have you walked through, and what were you hoping would bring spring?
- Claudia's testimony describes chasing corporate success, New Age spirituality, and self-help as a sequence of 'temporary fixes that left me empty'—what patterns do you recognize in your own story?
- What does it feel like when belonging is based on performance or identity markers rather than something more permanent?

The Bible's diagnosis of the human condition is not merely moral failure but a severed relationship—sin cuts us off from God who is life itself, leaving us as 'living dead,' like cut flowers separated from their roots.

The Advent sermon on Colossians 1 presses toward a picture of God that most modern people miss: 'God is life.' The relationship between life and God, Pastor Brant argues, is very much like the relationship between sunlight and organic life on the planet. He describes the strawberry plants on his deck, their tendrils desperately reaching toward the last rays of sun to stay alive. Cut off from sunlight, there is death. In the same way, to be cut off from God—who is not merely a more powerful creature but the very source and sustainer of all that exists—means that we, too, are dying. This is what the Fall of Adam and Eve put into motion: 'They were separated from the fullness of that life to become a kind of living dead outside of relationship with God.'

The Luke 17 sermon extends the illustration with the image of cut flowers. We love to bring flowers into the house, but cut off from their roots, they cannot live for long. Another image in the same sermon is a desert island: a person who has a few resources shipped in that are sustaining life for a while, 'but we've got no way back to the mainland.' Romans 6:23, cited in both the Easter and Advent sermons, states it bluntly: 'The wages of sin is death.' Isaiah 59:2 presses the point: 'your sins have separated you from God.' This separation is not just a religious deficit—it is a fundamental rupture from the one who is life itself.

The Easter sermon brings this diagnosis to a personal level. Pastor Brant asks the congregation to stop comparing themselves to others and look honestly inward: 'Have you felt the slavery to sin? You're not able to deal with it on your own.' The shriveled tomatoes he grew on his deck—technically tomatoes, but not real tomatoes—become an image of a life that is technically alive but far from the glory God intended. 'God didn't make us to be shriveled fruit. He made us for glory.' Understanding sin as this relational rupture, not merely rule-breaking, is what makes clear why only a reconciler—not a life coach or a self-help regimen—can solve the problem.

- The Advent sermon uses the image of sunlight and organic life—how does that picture of dependence change the way you think about what sin actually does to a person?
- Pastor Brant describes us as 'born as a kind of living dead, cut off from life with God'—does that description feel too dramatic, or does it match something you have sensed about yourself or the world?
- The Luke 17 sermon uses the image of cut flowers and a desert island to describe separation from God—which image speaks most clearly to you, and why?
- The Easter sermon says 'your sin is too much for you to handle'—when have you experienced the truth of that statement most personally?
- How does understanding sin as relational rupture rather than just rule-breaking change what you think the solution needs to be?

Christmas and Easter together announce that God did not leave us stranded. In Jesus—fully God, fully human—the gap between sinful humanity and the God of life is bridged. He is the Reconciler who brings us home.

The Advent sermon builds its case for Jesus as Reconciler on Colossians 1:18–20. Pastor Brant notes that Paul calls Jesus 'the firstborn' twice in this passage—once as the one through whom all things were originally created, and again as 'the firstborn from the dead,' beginning a new creation. The logic is fitting: the same one who made everything in the first place is now the one who is remaking everything that has been cut off from God's life. He is the head rejoined to the body, the life breathed back into what had become living dead. And he can do this because, as Paul writes in verse 19, 'in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.'

This is the mystery of the Incarnation that the Advent sermon dwells on at length. God did not send an emissary or upgrade a human being. 'We could not go to God, so the miracle of Christmas is that God came to us.' Augustine's famous passage, which Pastor Brant reads every Christmas, captures the staggering dimensions of this descent: 'The maker of man became man that he, ruler of the stars, might be nourished at the breast. That he, the bread, might be hungry. That he, the fountain, might thirst. That he, the light, might sleep . . . That he, the judge of the living and the dead, might be brought to trial by a mortal judge.' The one who is the fullness of God took on flesh precisely so that our separation from that fullness could be overcome.

The Luke 17 sermon adds a crucial clarification: 'God himself is the gospel.' The goal of salvation is not primarily a list of benefits received from a distant deity. The goal is God himself—knowing him, being brought back into relationship with him. As 1 Peter 3:18 states, 'For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.' The reconciling work of Jesus is the opposite of the 'God of the rug pull' that the Luke 17 sermon warns against. The God revealed in Jesus is one whose heart overflows with mercy toward the suffering, the outcast, and the wandering.

- The Advent sermon quotes Augustine's description of the Incarnation—which line in that passage strikes you most, and what does it say about what God was willing to do to reach you?
- The Luke 17 sermon argues that 'God himself is the gospel'—what difference does it make to understand the goal of salvation as knowing God, not just receiving benefits from God?
- Pastor Brant says in the Advent sermon that 'we could not go to God so the miracle of Christmas is that God came to us'—where have you felt the inability to reach God on your own?

- The Advent sermon describes Jesus as 'the firstborn from the dead' who begins a new creation—how does the idea of a new creation speak to your longing for things to be made right?
- How does the image of Jesus as Reconciler in Colossians 1:20 differ from the 'God of the rug pull' that the Luke 17 sermon warns against?

To be a Christian is not primarily to adopt beliefs or follow rules—it is to be spiritually united to Jesus himself, so that his death becomes our death and his resurrection becomes our life. This is what baptism symbolizes.

The Easter sermon centers on Romans 6:3–4 and makes the case that the most common biblical term for Christians is not 'Christian' but 'those who are in Christ.' Paul opens his letter to the Philippians not with 'to all the Christians who are in Philippi' but with 'to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi.' He addresses the Colossians as 'the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.' This language is not a stylistic quirk—it names the heart of what Christianity is. Pastor Brant draws on a helpful illustration from pastor Rory Shiner: being in Christ is like being in an airplane flying from Vancouver to Tokyo. You cannot benefit from that flight by being inspired by the plane, by submitting to its authority from a distance, or by running after it. The only relationship that gets you to Tokyo is being inside the airplane. In the same way, salvation is not merely being inspired by Jesus, or submitted to his authority from a distance, or following his example. It is being spiritually united to him—in him—so that where he goes, you go.

This union has two inseparable dimensions. First, union in his death. 'Before the good news of Easter comes, first there must be death.' The cross is not optional or incidental. It declares that sinful human beings need more than recalibration or positive reinforcement—our old self must be crucified with Jesus so that the power of sin can be killed and the penalty of sin can be paid. The

Easter sermon is honest: 'We know as Christians that the power of our sin is not killed in a way that we never sin again.' And yet sin no longer controls the way it once did; something else begins to grow in its place.

Sophia's testimony puts flesh on what this union produces in community. After trusting Jesus, she describes receiving 'new friends and family in Christ' and restored relationships with her parents and siblings. Emily's testimony closes with this declaration: 'The community and belonging I was searching for my whole life has been found here amongst you guys and amongst other Christians.' Union with Christ is never merely private; it plants a person inside a body, a family, a people.

- The Easter sermon uses the image of being 'in an airplane' to explain union with Christ—how does that illustration clarify what it means to be 'in Christ' rather than merely inspired by or following him?
- The Easter sermon notes that the most common biblical term for Christians is not 'Christian' but 'those who are in Christ'—why do you think that language matters?
- What would it mean practically for your daily life to understand yourself primarily as someone who is 'in Christ' rather than someone who attends church or follows Christian ethics?
- The Easter sermon says 'before the good news of Easter comes, first there must be death'—why is the cross, not just the resurrection, essential to the belonging the gospel offers?
- Sophia's testimony describes finding 'new friends and family in Christ' and restored family relationships after trusting Jesus—how does union with Christ create a new kind of belonging in community?

United with Christ's resurrection, Christians receive not symbolic life but real, experiential, eternal life—the life of God himself poured in by the Holy Spirit, changing desires, healing relationships, and pointing toward a fully renewed creation.

The Easter sermon insists that the life Christians receive in union with Christ is not symbolic or metaphorical. It is 'real, experiential, eternal life where the life of God himself is poured out into us.' To make this vivid, Pastor Brant describes building sandcastles with his children on the beach, bringing real shovels, piling up sand as high as possible to hold back the tide. But no matter how high the walls, the tide cannot be stopped. 'In a similar way, when someone is united to Jesus in his life, even the strongest of walls is just sand to his tide.' The walls of remaining sin, Satan's schemes, human opposition, and even physical death—none of them are strong enough to hold out the life of Jesus. This tide works at the level of desires: 'All the things that you used to love that destroyed you . . . you now begin to hate. And all those things about Jesus that maybe you found a little boring or even resented, you begin to love as you're drawn towards him.'

Martin's testimony illustrates how this tide pursues a person across decades. He drifted from faith through marriage, divorce, and middle age, 'remedying the pains with material possessions, the wrong relationships, sometimes substances or other escapes.' He found himself 'spiritually empty, alone and broken.' Then the tide began: he started reading the Gospels, immersing himself in biblical scholarship, replacing his Spotify playlist with worship music, and finding his way to Christ City. He describes having 'come around full circle to Jesus again with the wisdom and appreciation of what his sacrifice on the cross means,' having gone through the wayward path his life had taken. 'Christ City, I have found joy again.'

The Advent sermon expands the scope of this new life beyond individual souls. Quoting Romans 8:19–21, Pastor Brant describes creation itself as 'groaning and longing' for the day when it will be 'set free from its bondage to corruption.' The reconciling work of Jesus is aimed at all things—on

earth and in heaven—as Colossians 1:20 states. The hymn 'Joy to the World' captures it: 'He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.' The individual experience of new life by the Spirit is the first wave of a restoration that will one day encompass the entire created order.

- The Easter sermon uses the image of a tidal wave that no sandcastle can hold back to describe the life of Jesus at work in a believer—where have you seen evidence of that tide at work in your own life or someone else's?
- Martin's testimony describes returning to Jesus 'with the wisdom and appreciation of what his sacrifice means,' having gone around full circle—what does his story suggest about how God pursues people over time?
- Emily's testimony says 'the community and belonging I was searching for my whole life has been found here amongst you guys and amongst other Christians'—what role does the local church play in making the gospel's promise of belonging concrete?
- The Advent sermon describes creation itself as groaning and longing for restoration in Romans 8:19–21—how does the scope of God's reconciling work expanding to all things, not just individual souls, change your vision of what the gospel means?
- The Luke 17 sermon closes with Psalm 63 prayed together as a congregation—what would it look like for 'my soul clings to you' to become the truest description of how you relate to God?

The story of the ten lepers exposes a crucial distinction: nine received healing and moved on, but one returned to Jesus himself. True saving faith recognizes that Jesus—not his benefits—is the goal. He is the living water that finally satisfies.

The Luke 17 sermon presses on a distinction that is easy to miss: all ten lepers were cleansed, but only one was saved. Jesus says to the returning Samaritan, 'Your faith has made you well'—literally in the Greek, 'your faith has saved you.' The nine were not saved because they used Jesus as a means to the end they actually wanted: their health, their homecoming, their restored social standing. Pastor Brant names the pattern directly: 'The thing you set your heart on as the terminus of your desire—that is God for you.' If you come to Jesus to get wealth, money is your god. If you come to Jesus to get health as the ultimate goal, health is your god. If you come to Jesus to get conservative values, or a spouse, or a family, those things are your god. 'False faith cannot save because false faith worships a false God.'

The shocking element in the story is who returns: a Samaritan—the despised outsider, considered by the Jewish community to be a half-breed worshiping in the wrong place. Yet he is the one who turns back, praises God with a loud voice, and falls on his face at Jesus' feet. True saving faith is not a possession of the religiously established. It belongs to whoever recognizes in Jesus the end of all their longing, not merely a means to other ends. As Pastor Brant puts it, borrowing from the Gospel of John, Jesus is the living water, the bread of life, the light in the darkness. 'Eternal life, as John 17:3 says, is to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. The goal is Jesus.'

The invitation at the close of the Luke 17 sermon is therefore not to try harder or feel more. It is to turn—to recognize that life in this world is like a highway with an endless series of billboards promising satisfaction, each one giving way to the next. The invitation is to come off that highway and find rest in the one Augustine described: 'Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee, O Lord.' The congregation then prays Psalm 63 together—not as a performance, but as a

declaration and a cry: 'My soul clings to you. Your right hand upholds me.'

- The Luke 17 sermon asks, 'Will we accept Jesus' invitation and the gifts of his mercy, but then soon leave him again pressing on in this hopeless quest for joy somewhere else?'—when have you been tempted to use Jesus as a means to another end?
- Pastor Brant argues that 'the thing you set your heart on as the terminus of your desire—that is God for you'—what honest inventory does that statement invite you to do about your own life right now?
- The sermon notes that the Samaritan—the outsider—was the one who returned with worship—what does that reversal say about who God welcomes and what true belonging looks like?
- The Luke 17 sermon says 'Jesus has come to lead you home to himself'—for someone who has never felt a sense of spiritual home, what would taking a first step toward that look like?
- Augustine's line, 'Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee, O Lord,' is quoted in the Luke 17 sermon—where are you on that journey of restlessness and rest right now?

Conclusion

The three sermons converge on a single answer to the human desire for rootedness and belonging: we were made for God, and only God—given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—can satisfy that longing. The Gospel is not primarily a system of beliefs or a moral code; it is the story of God crossing every distance to reconcile wandering, dying, rootless people to himself. As the Easter sermon puts it, to be a Christian is to be 'in Christ'—united to the one whose resurrection life is a tidal wave that no sandcastle of sin or death can hold back. The four baptismal testimonies from the Easter Sunday Gathering put flesh on this reality: Claudia cycled through corporate ambition and New Age spirituality; Martin numbed his emptiness with

possessions, substances, and wrong relationships; Sophia sought escape from pain in self-harm and despair; Emily chased belonging through sex, alcohol, and manifestation practices. Each of them tried other sources of rootedness before discovering that Jesus himself is the home they had always been searching for. Their stories are not exceptional—they are the human story, the story of the nine lepers who never stopped running. The invitation of this study, and of all three sermons, is to be the one who turns back. To recognize in Jesus not a useful resource but the living water, the bread of life, the firstborn from the dead who is remaking all things. Encourage participants to close by returning to Psalm 63:1–8, prayed aloud together as it was in the Luke 17 gathering—both a confession of need and a declaration of rest: My soul clings to you. Your right hand upholds me.

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