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Coop's Column - Belonging

Lonesomeness, that bleak and desperate feeling of abandonment and forsakenness, is the worst—the absolute worst—that can overtake any human being.

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Lonesomeness, that bleak and desperate feeling of abandonment and forsakenness, is the worst—the absolute worst—that can overtake any human being. As the feeling gradually descends upon one's spirit—when he starts to think that heaven is silent and earth doesn't care—then desolation and despair follow on behind to smother out life and hope. But soon even these become crushed and disappear. A frozenly inhuman silence—an utter and absolute sense of nothingness—holds them in its choking grip. Lonesome people dwell—alone—in a dark and shriveling hell, an awful place where they lose whatever once made them feel human.

For lonesomeness is hell. And hell is everlasting lonesomeness.

Lonesomeness is the most hostile invader ever to have stolen into God's hearty and vigorous creation. Lonesomeness has no role to play in the intricacies of how God intended it to work. Creation's Maker declared: "It is not good for human beings to be alone." Thus God longed for his human creatures to be with one another—to feed one another's spirits by mutual "worthwhiling." God also wanted people to know that they belong to him—that they matter deeply to him. A bright and invigorating fellowship, both among fellow human beings and also with God—that's the ticket to going at life in fully human, fully alive sort of way. It's living as God intends.

For belongingness is heavenly. And heaven is everlasting belongingness.

In each of these weekly reflections, I have been aiming to explore why followers of Jesus make it a regular practice on Sundays to congregate, and why they do what they do when they get together.

At the beginning of the series, I suggested three reasons why Christians gather:

- *To recall their identity*—to remind themselves who they are and to whom they belong
- *To reaffirm what they believe*
- *To reset their direction—to reorient themselves, and to re-pledge to their aims for living*

High on the list of what God's children long to hear when they gather is that they are not alone in this world. They never tire of hearing that He cherishes them and strongly holds them in his caring embrace.

That awareness of belonging to their Maker and Savior holds them fast when life's circumstances rush at them and threaten to swamp the fragile little boats of their souls. So they keep cupping their ears to hear God telling them: "I am with you. You need not face your circumstances alone."

One fact has become clear to me: When people trust that Divine word, it changes how they go at life. During my many years as pastor—but even from the days when I was a little boy—I've had a special vantage point, a front-row seat, to see the difference it makes.

Permit me to tell you about one person I knew well for whom knowing she belonged to God made all the difference.. She is Marjorie Cooper, my mother. I must ask your pardon, please, for commenting about one so close to me. But I'd be derelict not to report what I saw over many years and at such close distance.

On August 29, 1985—almost exactly 25 years ago to the very day that I write these words—my mother walked the final few steps of a long path marked by heavy suffering which led her from this life, through death, to life eternal with Jesus. The verb "walked" is 100% metaphorical—she hadn't been able to use her legs for 40 years. At age 26 she became paralyzed from her neck down to her toes. She

spent her life's remainder—39 years and 10 months, to be exact—lying on her back in an iron lung machine, which did her breathing for her.

But to the very end of her life, she endured—no, more than that, she was victorious over—her circumstances. Despite her difficulties, not once during her years of sickness did I hear my Mom complain. On the contrary, she was radiantly life-affirming, and had such quiet contentment about her that her paralyzed lungs seemed to be full of the fresh breath of God. The secret to her life of patient tranquility? In her own words: “I know that Jesus is with me. I *belong* to him.” Thus, with a twinkle in her eye, she called her iron lung “my green Cadillac,” and with rock-solid confidence she never grew weary of affirming:

“Though God’s wise and loving purpose
Clearly now I may not see,
Yet I believe, by grace through faith,
All shall work for good to me.”

Few were the Sundays during those 40 years when Mom felt well enough to make it to church. But she was overjoyed when she could. Because it was there, among the assembly of God’s people, that her heart received fresh assurance about what her head already knew. It was there—through singing and reading, through preaching and receiving the sacraments, each and all of them God’s gifts to her—that she became reminded that she *belonged* to God. It was there that she could declare: “O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who puts their trust in you.” (Ps. 84.12)

Church-going—worshipping together with God’s people—serves to counteract spiritual lonesomeness, feeling bereft of God.

Affirmation of Trust

*If the LORD our leader be,
We may follow without fear;
East or West, by land or sea,
Home, with him, is everywhere;
When from Esau Jacob fled,
Though his pillow was a stone,
And the ground his humble bed,
Yet he was not left alone.*

*“Fear not, Jacob, thou art mine,
And my presence with thee goes;
On thy heart my love shall shine,
And my arm subdue thy foes:
From my promise comfort take;
For my help in trouble call;
Never will I thee forsake,*

‘Till I have accomplished all.”

- John Newton, 1725-1807

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