

“Facets of Belonging”

David Fu

Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD

September 28, 2025

Story for All Ages “I’m Sorry You Got Mad” by Kyle Lukoff (illustrated by Julie Kwon)

Reading from “*What is the Cure for the West's Individualist Worldview*” by Tim Connolly

[American] Individualist thinking can also negatively affect our ordinary lives. The Path, a book I have purchased multiple times as a graduation gift, takes on the ethos of self-actualization that is present in individualist societies. As [its authors] Puett and Gross-Loh write:

“Many of us now believe that each of us should be a unique individual who knows themselves. We believe we should be authentic, loyal to a truth we now tend to locate not in a higher deity but within ourselves. We aim to live up to the self we were meant to be.”

Yet, they go on to argue, such notions in fact serve to limit our potential by giving us a narrow picture of who we are and what we might become...

The Confucian alternative begins from a notion of what contemporary scholars call the ‘relational self’ – that a person cannot be understood in isolation from their connections with those around them. What is most relevant about me is not that I am a free and autonomous agent, but rather that I am so-and-so’s son or daughter, grandchild or sibling; someone’s teacher, colleague or mentor; a member of such-and-such neighborhood and community. In its conception of the person as inseparable from their relationships, the role-bearing self poses a challenge to the social contract view of humans as pristine individuals who participate in society only voluntarily.

Reading by Rev. Scott Tayler

We belong to every part of our lives and every part of our lives belongs to us. Even the failures. The cruelty. The betrayals. The addictions. The cowardice. Until we embrace those scared and tender parts with the kindness and forgiveness we so generously give to others, we will never be whole. We will never be home.

Sermon

- Lead in
 - The Soul Matters worship theme for September is “Building Belonging”, and here we are at the last service of the month. I have, roughly, three loosely related thoughts this morning. It's a bit of a mishmosh, and it won't take too long. But before we get to that, let me plant some seeds by telling you that next month's theme is “Cultivating Compassion”. Cultivating Compassion. Get it? Got it! Good!

Back to belonging. You may remember that a few weeks ago I shared a reading from Brene Brown about true belonging. True belonging is about being part of a community that truly accepts you. If you truly belong, you do not have to deny who you are, *and* you do not have to deny others, you do not have to disparage others, you do not have to “other” others.

- Pen community
 - Not long after that service, somewhat unexpectedly, I ran into this language of belonging in real life. A woman friend of mine was talking about a certain community:
 - Pretty much all of her life she had been a shy person and definitely not a joiner. Her circle of friends and connections was very small. But as she became part of this community, because it was meaningful to her, and because the community was extremely welcoming and accepting, she blossomed. Here's what she said that caught my attention: “It's something that expresses me, it's where I belong, and it's not like trying to fit into something I don't care about. It's like I can actually be myself, and yeah, these people are all different from me, but they accept me as really being part of them... And it's just this unbelievable thing that I never could have imagined.”
 - So, what is this community of which my friend speaks? Is it a School? Is it a Club? Is it a Church? [pause] Nope. None of these. It is the fountain pen and stationery community! A community of collectors and appreciators, of writers and artists, of makers and crafters, and of consumers. It is a community of *hobbyists*.
 - Hobbies are an interesting phenomenon. Different hobbies have different vibes, different social rules and contracts, different points of entry, different accessibility – different criteria for belonging. Fountain pen and stationery enthusiasts are united by their love of the hobby; and love for *any* aspect of the hobby, of which there are many, is the *only* requirement for acceptance.

Love of the hobby. Fun fact: the Chinese word for “hobby” is composed of the two characters for “love” and “good”. Interesting, yes?

Now the cynic and skeptic in you or me might suspect that fountain pens and stationery are about conspicuous consumption, about privilege, about rich folks with too much time and too much money on their hands. And, to be honest, there is some of that, but it’s really not the focus. Indeed, the hobby can be and is enjoyed by many quite thoroughly with very little money; and there is a refreshing lack of gatekeeping that welcomes and celebrates all newcomers, regardless of how much they spend. And it is a generous community: at many pen shows, there is a “share the wealth” table filled with free supplies donated by other attendees.

So that’s my little story about how a friend of mine, who was not much of a “joiner”, found belonging and meaning by joining. She just had to find the right group.

- Join or Die
 - Speaking of joining and groups, this spring I viewed a documentary titled “Join or Die” about the importance of clubs, civic groups, and the like. Harvard professor and social scientist Robert Putnam has spent years researching and documenting the ongoing, 50 plus year trend of declines in membership in all kinds of groups: churches, civic societies, bowling teams, even picnics. His thesis is that the decline in the healthy function of our democracy is directly related to this decline in civic participation, because we are forgetting how to work with one another in spite of our differences. I found it to be a fascinating and sobering watch, and I encourage you to see it yourself. But more importantly, I encourage you to act upon its primary charge: Join something! Participate! And this is important, it needs to be in person. Virtual does not count – that’s part of how we got to where we are.
 - “But I’m not a joiner!” you might say. I get it. Groucho Marx once quipped that he wouldn’t want to belong to any club or organization that would accept him as a member. I’ve always found this remark to be witty and a bit “meta”. Recently, I realized that the underlying sentiment could be either self-deprecating and humble, as in “If your group can’t see what a lousy member I would be, then you must not be a worthwhile organization – for any club that was worth their salt would reject the likes of me,” or it could be proud and haughty, as in “any group that thinks I’m good enough for them is certainly not good enough for me – I’m better than that.”

What I notice about both these interpretations is the common thread they share, that in either case, the organization does not properly recognize the worth of the quipper. They do not see the individual for who they are.

But Groucho's humorous jab is based on a hypothetical, and it comes from an individual – Groucho. I think that, in a backhanded way, it is an expression of one's fear of losing one's individuality – perhaps this is why it has had such staying power and resonated for so many people, in our culture which so highly values individuality. But maybe we have gone too far. Maybe we are missing something. Which brings us to our first reading.

- Identity as relationships
 - One's self, while important to develop and nurture, is not a be all, end all kind of thing. Without others, who are we? To modernize John Donne, "No person is an island, entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, A part of the main." And so I find the Confucian notion of the "relational self", of defining who you are in terms of your relationships with others, to be interesting and worthy of serious consideration. It helps me figure out what I am a part of, it helps me figure out my purpose, it helps me figure out where I belong.
 - And this focus on relationships and the act of sermon writing naturally leads me to think about my relationship with the Spirit, with Nature, with the Holy – with God. What is my relationship with God? That's certainly one of the big questions...
- Jewish High Holy Days
 - Friday marked the beginning of the Jewish High Holy Days with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, and they will culminate with the most sacred day in the Jewish year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. According to Jewish law, during this time, no work is to be done, and no worldly pleasures are to be indulged. It is a time to contemplate God and one's relationship to God, a time to confess and atone for one's sins, and a time to make honest efforts to repair the harm one has done to others during the year. It is a time for apologies.
 - A true apology, like the one **eventually** modelled by the child Jack in our Story for All Ages this morning, is a difficult reckoning. Why is it so hard for us to do? I think our second reading from Reverend Scott Tayler this morning gives us a hint. Let's hear it again:

- “We belong to every part of our lives and every part of our lives belongs to us. Even the failures. The cruelty. The betrayals. The addictions. The cowardice. Until we embrace those scared and tender parts with the kindness and forgiveness we so generously give to others, we will never be whole. We will never be home.”
- Yes, our sins and our failings are part of us, but we are *afraid* of them. Yet, to be in good relationship with your God, to be able to grow as a human being, you must acknowledge them, you must accept them, you must let them find belonging in your soul. For otherwise, you will be owned by them, and you will be stuck. But it’s hard. It’s hard because we don’t want to admit our faults.
- It is only after Jack shares his feelings about being taunted by the other boys that he begins to see the light, to come around and truly apologize. It is an important moment for him, but Ms. Rice says that he is *almost* there – why? Because sharing these feelings is still about his reasoning for knocking down Zoe’s castle – it is still about him, it is not about acknowledging his actions, it is not saying sorry, it is not helping fix what he broke. But once he admits what really happened, he can finally get it right, and then he and Zoe help to build a little community in the end. Today’s story was really quite deep!
- Wrap-up
 - So that’s what I got for today. In short:
 - 1) Join. Participate.
 - 2) Consider yourself in terms of your relationships.
 - 3) Own your failings, or they will own you.

Each of these is about building belonging in its own way.

- And just as sacrificing the *group* for the sake of the *self* is not belonging; neither is sacrificing the *self* for the sake of the *group*; both miss the mark. The goal is to be a part of a group that accepts you as the individual you are, and to build belonging in that group by accepting others. So go find such a group, and join it, and don’t stop there, work to create more such groups – for that is the holy work of building the Kingdom of God on this earth. And Heaven knows we need more of that.

Amen.