

“Belonging”
Isaiah 44:1-8; Romans 6:17-23;
John 17:13-19

November 4, 2018
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

We are going to talk about a concept today that as Presbyterians I don't think we talk about a lot. That's *sanctification*. It's not a concept that Presbyterians have done a lot of theological work with. As we have been thinking about the nature of the journey of faith, we've recognized that we start with this confidence in God—a confidence and trust in who God is: a God that receives the Prodigal and the older son; a God who then invites us to be a body of Christ; a God who is with us even in those places that are hard.

We hear in Isaiah about the idea of a rock in the midst of shifting sands, or a river through the desert. Being engaged with God is to engage with that gift of grace God gives us that gives us the solid rock or the river through the desert and enables us to have some confidence in who God is. It is through that confidence that we can begin to recognize that we are called to be God's people and make a commitment. And, commitment is one element of sanctification.

This image of two ropes tied together is an image of commitment, that we are tied together and that we're committed to be God's people through the trust we have in God, the grace God has given us, and the Spirit with us.

I struggle a little bit with the thought about commitment and what it means because oftentimes it feels like it implies limitations. Perhaps that's true in some ways, but when I was growing up there was a children's story that made a lot of sense to me. “I think I can. I think I can.” It's a story about the little engine that took over because no one else could get the animals and the toys to the children on the other side of the mountain. For me, that is at least one example of commitment—taking on a task and deciding to carry it through, being committed to it. The idea of being committed shaped that little engine's life. It took on what it was asked to do. The idea is that as we live our lives, we are shaped by the work we do, the tasks we take on, and the mission we accept.

The other thing I was thinking about is how much I feel shaped by the nature of time, the way we use time. How many of you last night were thinking “spring forward, fall back?” For many years people didn't have clocks. It's only been within approximately the last five hundred years that we really have had time pieces and have begun to set our lives to time and shaped it by “how long is this going to take” or “can I make it there in this amount of time” or “how many hours in a day do I work.” It shapes who we are. We may not feel like we're committed to a clock, and yet other times it may feel like we are. We are sometimes struck by how defined and filled our time is. We know that we get shaped by our view of time. It's the nature of our lives.

It's amazing to me that they have figured out they can shape watermelons by putting them in containers of different shapes so they grow into that shape. It makes me think

about how often I feel like there are ways in which I've grown into a particular shape because of the environment that I've been in, the nature of the people I've been around. It's just human nature. It is the way of life that we're going to be shaped by something. It may be something we commit ourselves to, and we may recognize that commitment or not. Of course, in scripture we are invited to follow Jesus, to let following him be what shapes our lives, forms who we are, becomes our commitment, and defines our priorities.

Today, we get to celebrate and remember those who have gone before us, some of whom have shaped our lives and some of whom have shown us the way we want to be shaped by the nature of being a faithful and wonderful person. In order to shape someone's life, it seems like one needs to be filled with the spirit and guided by God's grace.

I've been talking about being open to the Spirit and then being led by the Spirit. Today, I'm talking about letting the Spirit shape and form us into something where we belong. But there's part of it which we do. It's agreeing to commit our lives to allow the Spirit to be at work, to follow Jesus, to pay attention to God above, to be sanctified, to know where and to whom we belong.

When we think about commitment, there's a story about Nelson Mandela when he was on trial for treason. Here's what he told the court:

"I've fought against white domination. I've fought against black domination. I cherish the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve, but if need be, it's an ideal for which I'm prepared to die."

When I think about the commitments I've made, I don't usually put them in quite those kinds of terms. Am I willing to die for that commitment? And yet, if we look at the very person we follow, the savior we claim, he committed his life to do God's will and in doing so was willing to die to take on the sins of the world. His commitment to God's will, and to us, is what gives us the very grace of God that we need. He shapes the nature of what is considered a form of torture, the cross, into a symbol of love and grace.

So how does all this fit with sanctification? What does that mean?

In Second Thessalonians, Paul says, "We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth." Sanctification comes through the Spirit.

What is sanctification, then? I think, first, it's a *confidence* in God. Second, it's a *commitment* to God. And third, it's *continuing* in that life. But it's not something we do on our own. It's a way of being rooted and grounded in love—another way Paul says

it—through the Spirit, through the grace of God. In the song that we sang earlier today, it said we are shaped as the potter shapes the clay. It's a willingness on our side to accept the grace on God's side, given to us in the Spirit that enables us to see in ways that we wouldn't have seen before. It's paying attention and belonging. You see, when we find the confidence to trust in God, we find the invitation to be committed to be God's people, to become the body of Christ, and we are willing to live that out, to continue in following Jesus, open to the Spirit. It changes who we are. It's what shapes us and forms us and gives us our being. It's what we come to celebrate, to recognize it is in allowing God to shape and form and guide us that we are sustained and made part of one another, that we are the body of Christ. This confidence, commitment, and continuing in God's grace through the Spirit is sanctification.

But the world may look fuzzy. I think the world looks pretty fuzzy these days. I can't say that I understand it all. It is in that very moment when I am reminded that I can have confidence in God, that I can confess God's grace, that I can commit myself to be one who recognizes that God invited me to live in a particular way. We talked about last time as fruits of the spirit. We can continue and be those who belong to God, to recognize our sanctification.

So many messages in the world say if you do it this way, this will be the result in your life. It's very clear (or at least we're promised it's clear). I'm not so sure that following the Spirit, opening ourselves, being sanctified and being rooted and grounded in love means everything is clear. It means we know what and whom we can trust, what we're committed to, what shape our life is taking. We don't know the exact steps we will take. We don't know the exact journey we'll be on, but we know who is with us. We know whose we are, where we belong, what home we'll end up in. And when we know, we learn to love; we learn to share the grace of God; we learn to find joy in the midst of sorrow.

We get to celebrate those who have gone before us and celebrate those who are around us, and to celebrate that God has given us life, and sustains us, and invites us to be a family of faith, to know we're not alone, to know where we belong, to know that we are sanctified, whether sometimes it's a little fuzzy or not. Amen.