

# “ROADBLOCKS TO BELONGING”

A sermon preached by Rev. Maggie Wallin  
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This message is the second to the last one in our series on Belonging, a series that began with the theme that we all have an inborn desire to find Home, to be “at home,” which is anywhere that we truly belong. Over the last several weeks, we have looked at various aspects of Belonging, and what Belonging really means. Last week, Greg affirmed that to belong is different than to “get along” – that “fitting in” is not the same as belonging. Belonging – true belonging requires that we have the courage to recognize and BE who we are, without taking anything away, or attempting to hide any part of ourselves merely because we think it might be found unacceptable to others. To do that, of course requires us to know who we are, to courageously examine and share what we feel passionately about, and then to accept ourselves with love. In that way we can belong to ourselves.

This morning, we are taking a little different tack, and taking a look at the roadblocks to Belonging – those things, those factors that pull us apart from one another, that form a wedge between people and discourage coming together to solve problems. This theme could not be more urgent than it is for us in this moment, during these times in which political rhetoric is at an all-time pitch, a time when both sides of the political spectrum seem to be offering arguments based on made up – or at least grossly distorted assertions – assertions that are intended to create a false impression, assertions that are aimed at creating fear rather than rational opinion based on reason and compassion. It is a time in which people are reluctant to speak their mind, unless they believe their mind speaks in sync with the people they are present among.

Breneé’ Brown, who has provided much of the underlying material for this sermon, declares that WE – as a nation, as a culture – are in a spiritual crisis, both in this country and abroad. Some of this crisis has come about due to factors like

the pandemic we have experienced in the last few years, which encouraged us to stay away from each other, to not breathe the same air, or touch the same things, or one another. Fear of contagion has been, and in some cases, continues to be a large factor in the way that we approach living our lives. But, although the pandemic can be blamed for exacerbating the condition, Breneé' tells us that the beginnings of our discontent with each other, our moving away from each other and any sense of common purpose, began long before the pandemic ever began.

WE know this intuitively, when we think on it a bit. Over the last decade, our political discourse has become more and more vitriolic. It is hard to pin down a real beginning for this dissipation. Did it begin in earnest for us with the Viet Nam war, when suddenly we found some of our leaders lacking in honestly representing what was happening in SE Asia? When the stories coming out of the official offices could not be trusted to tell the truth? When investigative reporting came to the fore in order to illuminate the discrepancies and hold those in authority accountable to the people. When we learned that numbers could and sometimes did lie?

Or was it the shock of the events of 9/11/2001, which galvanized fear, and surely showed some of the best and worst of our human responses to traumatic events. There were those who rushed in to help save lives, to dig through the rubble looking for people, or parts of people that could be identified to provide closure for family members. There were those who offered the victims whatever solace they could, whether it be a meal, or cool drink, or a place to rest, or a place just to BE – to talk and share the trauma that they endured in those days. There were also those who responded by seeking out “others” to blame, to punish, to ostracize from society those they saw as being responsible, whether there was any real connection to the horrible event or not. Those who desired to pain entire groups of people responsible, who had no relationship to the terrorists that day. The net was too often cast extremely wide, and really illuminated our society's difficulties with race and cultural differences. Suddenly merely wearing a hijab was a mark of a terrorist.

But identifying the beginning of the increasing divide is less important than looking at the things that even now seem to create more division, those that serve to increase lack of civility in our discourse, and increase exponentially the sense of separation and thereby loneliness that we feel. It is good to understand

that our troubles have a longer history than we might have first thought the case. Troubles with long histories are likely to take significant amounts of time to turn around. We need to not get discouraged by the scale of the problems we see – know that we need to be in this for the long haul.

But now, let's take a look at some identifiable roadblocks and possible ways that we might address them, as we focus on creating a better world, a world of connection, a world of love greater than fear. Let us look at those roadblocks to belonging, and then propose some remedies that we can practice in our daily lives to try to turn the tide.

On that issue, Brene Brown's work Braving the Wilderness, provides much insight and some suggestions to get us started.

Brown discusses what she terms the "pre-sorting" that we do for ourselves – we sort ourselves into factions based on politics and ideology. We tend to hang with people who think like we do, who share our basic beliefs. Rather than exploring folks with ideas and experience outside our own, we turn away from each other and toward blame and rage. The result is an epidemic of loneliness and fear.

Our political discussions are often dominated by "us v them", a different kind of sorting. We form or accept others' forming of false dichotomies. How often have you heard things like: "either you are prolife, or you love abortion for everyone on demand." Or . . . "you are either for me or against me." Or "you either love everything I propose and follow every desire I have, or you are a turncoat, a traitor." Or . . . either you are a gun hater, believing that guns only belong in the hands of law enforcement, or you are a rabid supporter of the NRA and think every crazy should be permitted to own and carry a gun." These are all false dichotomies, false either/ors because there are myriad positions in between the extremes. There are those who believe that a woman's right to choose is important on many levels, without also believing that any and all requests for abortion should be permitted without limit, or that no parental involvement should be required ever. There are those who believe that responsible gun ownership is a right that should not be taken away without cause, but who also do not fully endorse the NRA's stance on every gun issue. You get the idea. This

either/or mentality creates arguments over issues that may not even be actually present.

Brown talks about having been approached by a participant in one of her forums who accosted her on the gun issue. Brown grew up in the rural South and learned to use a gun to hunt. She was steeped in gun safety and ethical use. She supports responsible gun ownership. The woman confronting her wanted to paint her as a full supporter of everything this person thought the NRA stood for. She was resistant to hearing Brown's refusal to argue on the basis of that pre-sorted, false dichotomy. Brown suggested to her that if they discussed the true issues and the nuances involved, they might actually find that the same things worried both of them about guns. But insisting on arguing based on the false dichotomy meant that no meaningful conversation could be held, and she would refuse to have that argument.

False dichotomies, rampant in my view in our political ads today, when laid out there forcefully enough can encourage the opposition to fold and capitulate, but it disrupts good dialogue, thwarts true communication, and ultimately impedes belonging, prevents finding middle ground, or even partial solutions to the issue that could be shared and honed into ways of communicating that have much greater likelihood of succeeding in winning over an opponent or coming to a conclusion that both parties could accept.

In addition, Brown points out that we are seeing a trend toward dehumanization of those who may not share our stance on the issues. It helps nothing to try to paint your opponent as a pig, or a bitch, or a piece of excrement, or something (anything) other than a human being. We need desperately to stop this in its tracks. Dehumanizing the Other, no matter who that Other happens to be, opens the door to committing atrocities, to taking actions that are unconscionable towards other humans. It "severs our shared humanity" says Kyra Newman. It encourages abandoning empathy for others and proceeding to violate basic human rights. Consider the treatment of refugees and their children during that period where the authorities were separating children from their parents. Many of those children have never been returned to their parents. No records were kept so that return would even be possible. There was a total disregard for the most basic human rights of those children, and their parents, who were coming to our country seeking safety and asylum.

Brown outlines things that we can begin to do today to roll back the chasm between us and move forward on establishing a community of belonging. Some of her suggestions are, I think, pretty challenging.

First, we need to begin making intentional contact with people with whom we disagree. I know – counter intuitive for so many of us. But, as Brown points out, it is much harder to hate when you are close up. If we draw near to the Other, seek understanding, seek illumination about why the contested issue is such an important one, what about it makes the participants feel passionately, we might find that we care about the same feared outcome. Brown advises that we be willing in these encounters to **engage** in difficult discussions. But, Brown insists, don't just agree to disagree. Rather continue the conversation seeking to understand where the other is coming from. Seek information, share where you are coming from, why it is so important for you. When you are still in disagreement, continue asking clarification. "Tell me more . . ." is a good phrase for seeking understanding. Take care of your nonverbal expressions. Rolling of eyes, or harumphing, or otherwise demonstrating dismissal or disdain, will not further the cause of gaining belonging, gaining peace.

Brown next suggests that we make efforts to show up for moments of collective joy and grief. She insists that showing up should be in person, not merely virtual. In the showing up for community emotional events, we begin to share the emotional experience with a diverse group of people. Sharing in this manner makes it more difficult to deny that we are connected to other human beings – even with people with whom we might disagree. Friday night I saw a piece on the evening news of a stadium in Connecticut, where the lost lives of two police officers, who had been killed in an ambush, were mourned by thousands of police officers who joined in the memorial having arrived in person from all over the US. The families were moved, the people attending were moved. The shared grief over the lives of these two fairly young officers, one of whom left 2 young children, and another not yet born, was remarkable. Hard not to see those families as fellow human beings. Or think about the British who so recently poured out their hearts with flowers, candles, waiting in endless lines to pay honor to Queen Elizabeth on her passing. Surely there are political divisions in England as there are here, but those days were days of collective mourning.

Sessions of shared community joy would include things like attending the dramas and musicals or concerts at the high school – or even the graduations. A large community comes together to celebrate the accomplishments of their youth. It is a time in which those attending can feel the humanity of the community, even that part with whom they might have differences of opinion. Shared experiences like these help us to see the other as a fellow human, help us to speak, to share, to engage in belonging.

Brown goes on to suggest that when we disagree, we need to have the courage to speak up and say our peace – nicely of course. “I” statements, sharing concerns, or views about whatever the disagreement is. Only by sharing our views (in ways that don’t shut other people down) will we be truly ourselves, a step towards true belonging. We need to accept the paradox of developing a strong backbone, a willingness to come forward with our thoughts and concerns and feelings on the one hand, and on the other hand presenting what Brown terms “a soft front” which really means standing and staying with compassion in our discussions. True belonging, Brown insists means willingness to own standing alone in what you see or believe. Essentially then, Brown encourages us to approach all humans – including ourselves as well as troublesome others, with gratitude, inquisitiveness, and compassion.

A tall order for sure. But it marks the beginnings of turning things around, of creating a space and a community of true belonging. May we take the way of courage and compassion, inquisitiveness and honesty, thus working for and accepting true life in all its intended abundance.

In the many blessed names of God Amen.