

TEXT: John 10:22-30

TOPIC: Jesus is asked by Judean leaders to say if he's the Messiah; Jesus' reply ... I already have; you're not mine.

SUBJECT: Getting home requires doing something that's hard to do: Thinking differently than we often do.

TITLE: The Person of Home

I want to invite you to think for a minute of all the people who've had your back throughout your years on this earth; people who have made you feel like you belong.

When I think of the people who had my back, I think of Betty Swedberg, my babysitter when I was only 2- or 3-years-old. She wanted the very best for me, and she wanted me to grow up in the faith. So much so, that she gave my parents a mini-Bible.

When I think of people who had my back, I think of Doug Messersmith, who was a camp counselor who worked with me at Camp Norwesca the summer before my senior year of high school. After that summer, the district camping committee said I could not be a camp counselor anymore, so as a protest Doug refused to return to Camp Norwesca, taking a stance with me.

When I think of someone who had my back, I think of Stef Palunik, my high school swimming coach. Going into my senior year, I decided not to play football, so I could focus on swimming. When I told the head football coach, he said I wouldn't make it to state if I didn't play football. When I qualified for state, Coach Jenkins came and argued rather animatedly with Coach Palunik in the hallway between the dressing rooms and the pool. When Coach Palunik came back into the pool, he looked at me with one of those looks. I knew what had happened. After practice, Coach Palunik was in the office and I asked him if he was OK, and he replied: Just don't let me down, Mark. I promised him I wouldn't and I didn't.

When I think of others who've had my back, I think of my friend Crystal and my best friend, Jack. I think of Marvin and Bill. Every one of them has blessed me with a sense of belonging.

There are others I could mention, too, but I won't; not now at least. I doubt some of the others would come as a surprise – since some are family – but there are a few others who might be surprising. As long as I am alive, I'm sure the list will keep growing.

Every one of us wants to know we belong; in fact, I'd believe it's one of our greatest needs. Often, belonging allows you to be vulnerable when you need to be. Often, when people bless you with that feeling of belonging, they are imitating Christ but ONLY when they give you reason to trust them because they chose to interact with you on a regular, personal basis, so trust would be built.

In John's gospel reading today, Jewish opposition asks Jesus "how long will you test our patience? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly" in part because Jesus had just healed a man on the Sabbath and embarrassed them for it, so again they are challenging Jesus' authority.

What happens next is the difference between having the materials to build a house, and having a home.

Jesus says, "You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep." At first glance, we might think Jesus is saying you have to believe before you can belong but Jesus is actually saying the exact opposite. In essence, he is saying that the Judean opposition struggles to believe because they are unwilling to give him their consent to belong. Said a little differently: Believing doesn't and can't come first. Belonging comes first.

One of the great blessings I experience when I go on trips anywhere is that I listen to podcasts on Apple podcasts or Spotify. As I've said before, I really appreciate the work Brene Brown does. The other day, I was listening to a podcast where she hosts Esther Perel, who is a

Belgian-American psychotherapist known for her work on human relationships. She's also authored several books.

In the interview – which is part of a series Brene Brown just finished – one of the topics of discussion has to do with AI. Now, I want to ask everyone a question, so we all know what AI is. Anyone? What is AI?

That's right. Most of us know it as artificial intelligence. Right now, it is part of the technology that is exploding right before our very eyes. AI is capable of creating content that can easily distort images of people and the things they say. AI can also be a blessing when it is used properly as a tool to help people, such as if someone posts puppies for sale on Facebook and the Meta AI can provide information about the breed to potential owners.

Perel, however, had her own term for AI. She referred to it as artificial intimacy, where people seek out what's artificial in exchange for what's real, and it is a rampant problem in our society right now. She said artificial intimacy can take any number of expressions all in an effort to give people the feeling of belonging. To me, that emphasizes how important belonging is to people. It makes me realize how important it is for me to give others what they need so they also feel like they belong, too.

Put this into a little different perspective. Jesus has our backs; by belonging before believing, Jesus offers us trust. By belonging before believing, Jesus makes a home for us in his person, so every time we live with the assurance that we belong, we are given license to let others know they belong, personally in a very relational way; all anyone has to do is apply themselves the way the Judean opposition reused to do. When belonging is at the heart of who

we are as Christ followers, we are like those we thought of earlier; we are people who are home for others.

So, for all practical purposes when someone makes us feel like we belong, Jesus is working through them because we need to know we belong.

Just like those people who became the persons of home for me. They were people who had my back even when I didn't ask for it.

Just like those people who became the persons of home for you, as well. They were people who had your backs, as well.

Just like Jesus, who invites us to know that we belong long before we even believe.

First and foremost, Jesus tells us we belong, so all that's required is our consent.

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.