

“Where do you really come from?” Reflections on belonging  
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Alison Li

Growing up as an immigrant to Canada, I got used to being asked, “so, where do you come from?” If I were in an uncooperative mood, I would say, truthfully but peevishly, “I’m from Calgary,” because of course I knew that wasn’t what was actually being asked of me. This exchange would usually result in a pause and a furrowed brow.

“No, where do you really come from?”

Typically, this question was meant in a kindly way. It served as an opening for the questioner to make a connection, to tell me about their travels in Asia or their nice Chinese neighbours. I usually listened with a smile—probably a rather stiff one—knowing that this was usually meant well. But it underlined to me that when that person looked at me, what they saw, first and foremost, was my otherness.

It seemed to me that the questioner, usually someone who didn’t yet know me, thought they needed to know where I and my ancestors had come from in order to understand me. That possessing the answer to this question would somehow *explain* who I was.

I want to thank Brad for sharing the lovely children’s story today and his thoughts of the ways in which we might transform this question.

Two months ago, at the end of Lent, Pablo Kim delivered a thought-provoking sermon to us entitled “From exceptionalism to radical inclusion.” I thank Pablo for reminding me of this question “where do you really come from?” which I heard a lot in my younger years, though I am pleased to tell you that I haven’t heard it for a very long time.

Pablo asked us important questions about what we understand by showing hospitality. Do some of us fall into acting as hosts while others of us are relegated to being perpetual guests? He challenged us to a God-centered radical inclusion in which we properly understand that God is host to us all.

Today’s reading from Acts is from a remarkable period in the development of the community

of Jesus-followers after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The community is struggling with the question of whether Gentiles might be included among the followers.

While praying and in a trance, Peter is given a vision of a large sheet being let down from heaven containing many four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds, and he hears a voice that tells him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

Peter protests, "Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth."

But the voice from heaven says, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." And this happens three times. When three men came to the house that he was staying at, the Spirit tells Peter not to hesitate about going with them. The Spirit tells him not to make a distinction between them.

This is a critical event in the history of the church, God's revelation to Peter and the disciples that God's word was not only for the community of Jews who had been the first followers of Jesus, but all peoples. That the distinctions of background, ritual, and practice whether circumcision or dietary law that had been previously been so important, were to be set aside. God has given a message not to make a distinction.

It takes this vision, this radical intervention by God, to shake his followers out of their long-held beliefs and practices. Bit by bit, the early Jesus-followers learn not to distinguish between the many different categories that had meant so much to them before. They learn to surrender practices that had seemed central to their faith. It is this long process that allows a small band of followers of Jesus to become a major movement in the Roman world.

The wish to belong is a powerful impulse. And because of this, it can be a dangerous thing. Some of the most frightening things we see happening in our world come from the exploitation of this wish by people to belong to something, a group, a movement, a nation. And it seems to me the best safeguard of a healthy positive kind of belonging is the ability of a group to appreciate the full humanity of its members. To be group where people do not have to hide away parts of who they are in order to belong. Where diverse views, experiences, and backgrounds,

can be a source of creativity, innovation, and challenge. And to remember that people can feel a lack of belonging for reasons that have nothing to do with obvious markers of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity.

The early Jesus followers had to take on this radical challenge, to let go of their way of doing things and categorizing people, and to understand which of their practices was essential and which were not.

I have been part of the TUMC community now for twenty years and I am grateful to say that I have felt welcomed warmly from the very beginning. You my church community have embraced and challenged me, given me tasks and responsibilities that have helped me to grow. Coming from a different strand of Christianity, in my early years at TUMC, I had to puzzle through many things from the lack of creeds and liturgy, to the fact that so many people seemed to be related to so many others. But I have never had any sense of being considered an outsider for any reason.

At the beginning of this sermon series, Trent Voth took us through a valuable analysis of the elements of our welcome statement and helped us to think about what it means to be a Christ-centered church based on the direction we face rather than the boundaries that exclude. I have to admit that I have not always felt at ease with TUMC's official welcome statement which is that TUMC welcomes, "people of all ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, faith backgrounds, physical capacities and gifts." I want to say very clearly that I acknowledge that for those who have felt painfully excluded from church, especially LGBTQ folk, being explicitly named in a welcome statement is absolutely critical and affirming, and I honour that.

It is just that it seems that by enumerating a list of the types of people we were welcoming, we were necessarily leaving all sorts of other categories of people unnamed. And perhaps, at base, what I really find uncomfortable is that our very act of extending a hand of welcome is framed in terms of these limiting categorizations of humanity. In our attempt to reach beyond these categories, I wonder if we have actually made them more foundational to our relationships? Are we in a way saying we welcome you "even though" you are this or that type of person? *Despite the fact* that your ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, is "other"? That is obviously not what the drafters of this statement intended, nor is it at all true. Because of course,

it is not just that our congregation welcomes these different types of people to be added to who “we” are, it is that we actually already *are* these types of people. We *are* people of different ethnicities. We *are* gender diverse and neuro-diverse. We *are* settler and Indigenous, old, middle-aged, and young. We *have* different sexual orientations, faith backgrounds, physical capacities and gifts. We come from many lands and speak many languages and we have many points of view. We *are*, and we welcome, these types of people. But each of us is so much more than what can be described by a single label, or even by a cluster of labels.

We’re not worried over the same distinctions and categories that Peter and his fellow disciples were. Our pre-occupations are every bit as powerful to us, and they are every bit as historically contingent. And to someone from another culture or time, they may seem as arbitrary and meaningless as the distinctions of other cultures to us.

Our continuing challenge is to be able to appreciate that the other person is every bit as complex as we ourselves are, with a rich history, a web of relations, and patchwork of experiences, particular temperament, idiosyncratic preferences, foibles, talents, tastes, dreams, and longings, and that any label of background, occupation, identity or orientation is the merest starting point in appreciating who that person is.

Our second reading was from Revelation. The apocalyptic vision of John is a real challenge to me. I admit I have difficulty wrapping my head around the startling signs and symbols that appear in Revelation. Scholars suggest many different ways in which we might try to understand these images, whether they relate to events at the time John was writing, or if they refer to events that are yet to come.

At root, however, prophetic visions are not so much predictions of the future but rather calls for God’s people to be true to the ways of God. And they are often ways of shaking God’s followers out of the way they have gotten used to viewing things and doing things. They are meant to be disturbing and disruptive, but also an inspiring vision of what God’s way is like. This reading gives us a bold vision of a new Jerusalem, a place in which every tear will be wiped away, where God will dwell with God’s people. It is the place of true belonging. The true home.

Growing up in prosaic suburban Calgary in the 70s, with my processed cheese sandwiches

and Flintstones lunchbox, and my solid, mainstream church, these sorts of apocalyptic symbols and prophetic visions were beyond anything I could make sense of. After all, the only “vision” I paid much attention to was “television.” And for me, television meant the adventures of the Starship Enterprise.

There were many appealing things about Star Trek’s vision of the future. Warp drive. Transporters. The universal translator. Small hand-held communicators that you could use to talk to people far away. For me as a kid, one of the coolest technologies was undoubtedly the doors that swooshed open and shut by themselves when you just walked up to them. That seemed incredible! Kids today will think this completely absurd, right? Automatic doors are so much a part of our lives today that it is hard to imagine that at one time, they seemed almost magical.

In the Star Trek world, I saw people who looked a little like me, a lot like me, and not at all like me. I saw the stories of those who felt like outsiders as I sometimes did, and those who were caught between two worlds, as I sometimes felt. And I saw a vision of a future in which these people were portrayed as having talents and dreams that were not narrowly defined by their being a particular type of person.

Nichelle Nichols, a talented actor and singer, played the role of Lieutenant Uhura, the communications officer who is calm, competent, responsible and resourceful. After the first season of Star Trek in 1966-7, Nichols thought about leaving the show to return to her first love, singing and performing on Broadway. At a formal dinner, she was told Dr. Martin Luther King Jr wished to meet her. He was a fan. In their conversation, she mentioned her plans to leave Star Trek and he urged her to reconsider. He explained to her that this was the only television show he allowed his children to watch and urged her to appreciate how meaningful it was for so many people to see her as a Black woman in a position of authority.

I don’t of course compare television to the visionary work of the prophets. But the potential of stories to inspire should not be underestimated. Because it is only in imagining a possibility that we can set a course for it.

Let us continue to do the serious work of building community so that one day soon, it will seem to our children an absurdity to have needed a welcome statement such as ours. Let us

continue to strive to cultivate a vibrant God-focussed hospitality in which each person is seen, respected, and valued in their multiple dimensions; so that for someone looking in on our worship and work, our welcome to all will be so obvious that it won't require our spelling out a list; so that a feeling of true belonging will be as unremarkable a phenomenon as doors that swoosh open.

Scripture: Acts 11:1-18, Revelation 21:1-6