

2024 08 11 Unboxing Belonging.

'Unboxing Our Faith', TUMC

[Judges 12:4-6](#), [Matthew 26:69-75](#) and [John 13:33-38](#). [Slides](#).

Good morning everyone, my name is Peter and I have a joke for you.

Why did the family of the recent convert to Anabaptism rush to rescue him?

Because they heard he fell into Gemeinschaft!

Why were they worried about him falling?

They had a fear of Gelassenheits!

All jokes are funniest when explained: **Gemeinschaft** is a German word for 'community' which I learned it from German Mennonites. And it also sounds a bit like 'the mine shaft' so I thought there was a joke there about someone falling into community, or into a mineshaft. It reminds me of Sarah, a member of this congregation from way back, who began attending TUMC and didn't know what Mennonites were, so she called her mother back home to ask if we were kosher.

The second joke is by my friend Isaiah - **Gelassenheit** is an Anabaptist term describing a spiritual and communal attitude of 'yieldedness' towards God and to the community. So why tell two jokes that reference obscure German Mennonite terms?

In our preaching series 'Unboxing our Faith' we are exploring some of the assumptions that we received packaged up in this thing called church. We take them out of the box, consider them from all angles, and then decide what to do. Already we have unboxed paradox and certainty, unboxed mental health and nonconformity, and now and forever, and today I would like to unbox 'Belonging'. We sometimes say that a person does or doesn't belong in a particular place or group. It

is possible for two or more people to belong together. Or for people to belong to a place, or a place to a person, or a person to some people.

When do you choose and work to belong, and when is it beyond your power? And what about belonging to God's people, or to a community like this church?

Let's unbox belonging in the two stories from scripture that we heard earlier. Both describe a crisis moment of uncertainty about where someone belongs. Soldiers guarding a river ford after a battle have to figure out who is part of their group and who is an enemy. This is an inter-tribal war, so these are kin who share the same language and appearance. But they have some regional accent differences, and so they use the word 'shibboleth' to figure out who is who. And during the frightening trial of Jesus, his disciple Peter is trying to get information, but the people he talks to can tell from his accent that he is from Galilee, and assume he is connected to Jesus.

In both cases it is clear when people are being judged. The vast majority of the time when we interact with other people we make judgements unconsciously or reflexively. This is not always a bad thing. On more than one occasion waiting at Bloor GO station for the train to Kitchener I've seen people with luggage looking uncertain. I know that they are in the wrong place to catch the train to the airport, so I go over and give them some information that will make their days better. I know that they don't belong on the lower platform, because I've also missed the train to the airport because I was standing in the wrong place.

The consequences for Simon Peter and for all the unfortunate Ephraimites were more severe. They were trying to fit in and convince the people around them that they belonged. Their accents betrayed that they were different, putting them at risk. There was nothing wrong with their accents. Their accents were just as legitimate as the people asking them questions. It just so happened that the people asking questions were the ones with power on their side, able to ensure that difference was dangerous.

Many of you know that I'm originally from the UK, and I married someone born and raised in Ontario. He will often point out that my accent shifts when I talk to friends and family back home. Suddenly we live in 'On-TARH-e-oh' instead of 'Ontear-e-o'. We also have our list of words we pronounce differently.

How Do You Say:



- 1) Tangy - 'Tang-gee' or 'tan-ny'?
- 2) Garage - 'Garridge' or 'Garahdj'? (Or 'Car Hole')
- 3) Clerk - 'Clark' or 'Clurk'?

The English language is a weird thing. But what's weird to me is that after living here for 14 years I often have a hard time remembering the 'correct' way to say a word. Because my brain counts 'this is the way I say it' and 'this is the way the people around me tend to say it' as the same level of correct. Sometimes Ken has to remind me how I say a particular word in my accent.

Obviously these are all minor oddities of language, but minor differences can indicate deeper issues. You might be aware of the concept of microaggressions, a way of understanding how power and culture interact to make people who are part of a minority or a disempowered group feel unwelcome and stressed. Microaggressions can be things like mispronouncing or forgetting someone's name, or repeatedly using in-jokes and language that isn't universally understood, or asking questions that rest on false assumptions. The unspoken message of

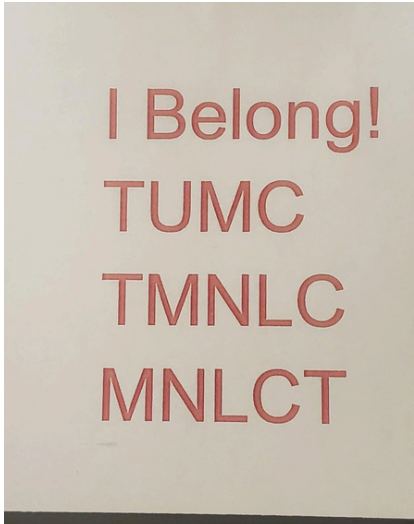
microaggressions is 'you do not belong here. You have to adapt to make sense of our ways of doing things.'

Microaggressions are possible because of the larger field of power and privilege. Some people have access to passports, some do not. Some people have no savings, others inherit money. If it wasn't for those tangible and visible differences in power, these little differences probably would not have the power to wound. But as it is, they function to remind people that we live in a world of unequal power and access.

This is a shame. Our differences really can be a source of joy and strength. Difference is one of the ways that God invites us towards love. When you value the strengths and skills of others that you don't have, it makes space for you to respond in appreciation and love - or in envy and distrust. And when you see a need that you can fulfill in someone else, you can reach out to them with compassion and generosity - or with a sense of entitlement and frustration. What makes you respond with envy in one case, and appreciation in another? For me, it depends on when difference belongs. **We move toward love when difference belongs.**

Here in our building at 1774 Queen Street we have a car park that we share with our other building partners. Now, on Sundays this is regularly used by the folks who drive in to attend one of the two churches that meet here. During the week the space is used a lot less. You'll see a sign that says 'Reserved Pastor parking', which is of course for me, because we all know that I'm the reserved pastor. And Michele is the outgoing pastor. That's a double pun because she's actually retiring. What you will also see is cars with a card on their dashboard that says 'I belong!' with a list of the three partners who share this building.

The reason we have this card is because we are not the only ones who use the car park. Various of our neighbours use it, along with people visiting the Beach for Jazz fest and other events. Regular users know that they don't have the right to park there. They know that



I Belong!
TUMC
TMNLC
MNLCT

they need to clear out ahead of Sunday services, or when one of the building partners runs an event. But cars with this note on the dashboard are fine. They belong, and if it's your car, you belong. And that's it - there's no question about whether you really need to park there or no process for taking away your card if you don't serve on enough committees. You belong here.

Belonging is an important human need. It is a spiritual attribute as well as a gift of place and community. The place and the people who claim you as part of their whole should be giving you that dual sense of personal acceptance and responsibility - you have a place to be, and you have a purpose to be. Last time I spoke from this pulpit we told the story of Moses hearing God call to him from the Burning Bush, and I learned that God wasn't just giving Moses a mission. God told Moses that he was part of a community, he had a heritage, and he was not by himself. He belonged. And Moses was being asked to act accordingly - to take risks, to go back to the place of danger, and to help his people. Moses didn't belong in either the world of the Slavers or the Enslaved, and so God was sending him to declare a new story which would end that world through the liberation of a new people.

Belonging is an important human need, and it gives us strength and purpose. But there are other human needs. There comes a time in most people's lives when they need to differentiate. They need to say 'I am not like you'. Parents who watch their children through adolescence know a lot about this. Adolescents also know a lot about this. The teenage experience often includes testing boundaries and ethical limits, pushing up against the claims of belonging. Sometimes this is not a safe or healthy practice, but differentiation itself is necessary. Any community asks something of its members - of those who belong to it, and it is healthy and right and necessary to question. To unbox belonging and ask 'does this fit me?' 'Is this really right for me'? Differentiation is the art of knowing, or seeking to know, that I exist. You need to be secure in the 'I' before you can claim that 'I belong'.

But differentiation is not just for teenagers seeking their own sense of identity. It is an important part of any social group. Without healthy differentiation, the individual

loses their identity and their will to the goals of the group. And there are countless examples of abusive religious, spiritual, and political groups who are more than happy for those who seek to belong to work themselves to the bone. It is important to know when to walk away - from an abusive relationship or a toxic work environment, and one of the tools to do that is to be differentiated - not identified with the version of yourself that others project onto you and demand you live up to. It's complex, necessary work. And it's spiritual work.

Last week Tim took us through that beloved verse - do not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. He described how this led to healthy acts of differentiation as individuals and faith communities sought to live with different ethics to the violence, waste and greed of their surroundings. And that leads to the creation of new norms and new groups, new ways of belonging, and a new need for differentiation.

It can be very satisfying not to belong. It's easy to think about the warm fuzzies of belonging - being in a place where everybody knows your name, or at least they do if you remember to wear your name tag. But think also about the times it can feel good not to belong. I wonder how many of us in this congregation, when we name our faith, would like to add 'but I'm not *that* kind of Christian'. It can feel good to point out the problems and set yourself apart. And it can also feel good to know that you don't fit in.

Take a look at one of my favourite strips from Canadian graphic artist Kate Beaton. All three people are thinking to themselves how everyone at this party is awful, except for me, a sensitive introvert. I love this because there is nothing as delicious as the feeling that you are too special and complex for other people to understand. This last



Peter Haresnape

week I heard two separate stories of people who contrived to attend a game wearing the colours of the opposing team. It's fun to stand out, not to fit in, and to belong to yourself alone.

I sometimes wonder if everyone here at TUMC secretly feels like they don't belong. The Mennonite Anabaptist faith is such a complicated culture, and right from the start this congregation was formed out of people who didn't quite fit in, but were not ready to count themselves out completely either. TUMC has been a gift to the rest of the church. We have offered critique and contribution, and we have served as a safe haven for people who need to do some healing differentiation. But I wonder. Do we all have Sundays when we take our seats, or stay home, thinking 'I don't really fit in here, and at some point they'll all find out'.

I'm not intellectual enough. I'm too intellectual, and not spiritual enough. I don't like singing or I don't do it well. I'm too proud of my singing and music. I don't have kids. Or, my kids can't sit still or they don't want to come, or they ask too many questions. I don't have time to volunteer or money to donate. I don't quilt, or do woodwork, or recycle, or bake, or visit my MP each month to talk about peace. I'm too old, and no one knows me any more. I'm too new, and no one has time to get to know me. I'm too messed up, and I can't stop crying. I'm too sad, and I can't cry. The things I believe about Jesus, or God, or the Trinity, are not what it says in the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective. I don't like reading the AGM report book. I'm not a good peacemaker. Maybe I should be an Anglican, or a Unitarian, or a Communist, or the Pastor. Does any of this ring true? Do you hear these types of voices in your own life? I would like to know about it, not so I can persuade you differently, but so that you can have it acknowledged. Talk to me after the service or send me a message. I'd like to know.

When people are a part of a group, but don't really feel they belong, that can prompt all kinds of behaviour. Some respond by working harder and trying to make it happen. Some lament that it isn't working. Some people decide to leave quietly, and

see if anyone comes following after them. Some people double down and insist on the rules of the in-group.

None of these are unique to religion in general or TUMC in particular. They are all normal human needs being expressed. Look at the followers of Jesus. For a few short years they knew what it was to belong when they walked with Jesus, but it did not go the way they expected. In the years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension they started to create communities of belonging that held a radically different vision from the Empire around them. And yet immediately they were dealing with all the same problems. There is no place to belong which is without its problems - no perfect softball team, or housing co-op, or church community. But God created us for community with God and with each other. You are called to belong.

Simon Peter was desperate to belong and to follow Jesus to the end. He told Jesus 'I will lay down my life for you', and Jesus told him 'you will deny me three times'. Peter's denial turned out not to be resistance to Jesus, but fear of death and consequence - turning away from following the path that Jesus walked, and choosing not to lay down his life after all. But from that apparent failure to follow, Jesus still called him back into service, back into belonging. Peter found that he truly belonged. He had not lost himself, he had not died or been absorbed, but Jesus welcomed him back and told him - if you love me, feed my sheep.

Wherever you are - belonging, exclusion, differentiation, confusion - we can unbox it. Wherever you belong, this community has a commitment to welcome, to listen, and to seek a peaceable way of living together in our differences, our conflicts, and our earnest longing for wholeness. Jesus is clear that there is a place for you in God's beloved community. That welcome is from God, it is not something that this church creates or controls. But I hope that we communicate it with joy, sincerity, and courage. **We belong. Thanks be to God.**



**We
Belong**