“Practicing Belonging” – Sermon for Cornerstone (Aug. 16, 2026) CLEAN COPY

Introduction/Hook

A number of years ago I was in England and I scheduled a day trip into London with my brother-in-law. We planned to visit all the big spots; Westminster Abbey, Big Ben, the Tower of London, St. Paul’s Cathedral, and more. But the crown jewel in our day was the final stop – a trip to the Emirates Stadium to watch an Arsenal match. Being a fan of that soccer team I wore my Arsenal shirt into the city, knowing where we would eventually end our day. But there was one problem: There are many soccer teams in London, and they don’t like each other very much. Along with that, most of the places we were planning to visit weren’t in Arsenal’s part of town. As you might expect, I experienced a range of unpleasantries that day. Some people laughed at me, quite literally behind my back. Others stood up from where they were sitting and stared me down as I crossed the street in front of them. To say that I didn’t feel that I belonged would be an understatement. Not only did I get the sense that I didn’t belong but I stood out like a sore thumb – wearing the wrong colours in the wrong part of town. I’m sure that others recognized exactly who I was – a naïve foreigner wandering the streets of a place I knew little about. But towards the end of the day we made our way up to the borough of Islington near the stadium – and just before the game we decided to stop at a pub for some local fare. This pub had a special requirement – you must be an Arsenal fan to get in. The man at the door welcomed us like we were brothers. The atmosphere within the pub had the distinct feeling that you were among family, and everyone anticipated the event that was to come with hoping hearts for a result that we could all celebrate together. This experience was the complete opposite to what I had experienced throughout the day. I really felt like I belonged!

Can you remember a time when you were searching for belonging? When you felt like an outsider? Perhaps you can think of a time when you felt you didn’t belong and then someone came along and made you feel like you did. The desire to belong is a distinctively human feature. Two weeks ago Pastor Dave helped us to see that our very identity is rooted in belonging – that we belong to Jesus. We were created into belonging and for belonging. And so we have this deep desire and need to belong, and this is fulfilled only in our relationship to God. Last week Pastor Steve built on that by explaining that belonging is not just something we seek for ourselves but something we both receive from God and extend to others. So as we continue our series this morning on *“Finding and Extending Belonging in Jesus’ Family”* we’re going to focus in on the practice of belonging in three phases.

Before we get into those specifics, however, it’s important to recognize that practices are in large part an extension of formation. We practice out of our nature, our very being, out of who we are. As Jesus himself said in the Sermon on the Mount, *“a good tree bears good*

fruit and a bad tree bears bad fruit." (Matthew 7:17) reference only please. If, inwardly, you want to be a person who practices belonging – who extends it to others and we, as a confessing church want to extend the blessing of belonging to one another and to our neighbours then we must make absolutely certain that we are being formed into the image and likeness of Jesus and in order to do that we must remain in the vine that is Jesus himself. We can't just rely on our status with God because formation takes time and intention. We can't assume that we will become a people who extend belonging if our posture is passive. A passive posture does not just stall our formation in Christ. It also pulls us away from His abiding presence. This leaves us in a murky middle ground where we verbally value belonging but do nothing to extend it. What happens then, when we are passive, is that we will be formed by the way the world practices belonging – the search for a tribe, life in the echo chambers of right opinions. A passive posture doesn't mean that we're not being formed, it means that we're allowing influences outside of the person of Jesus to form us, and that's not the kind of belonging we're called to. If you're in your car and you put it in neutral and take your foot off the brake pedal you're not going to stay where you are because the road you're on has a shape and dimension – it's not perfectly level, it's not a blank slate. You'll start to roll in that car and eventually you'll run into something (and that will give the car a new form!). That's what a passive posture does when it comes to formation. We are being formed whether we intend to be formed or not.

This brings us to the first of the three acts, which is 1. **Practicing belonging in the church**

In Colossians 3 Paul is talking to the Colossian church about their newfound identity in Christ and its implications. In the verses immediately prior to our reading this morning Paul spells out the differences of a life formed by God and a life formed by the world. In verse 2 he tells them to *"think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth."* There's that intentionality – *"think about these things"* he says. *"Dwell on them, contemplate them. Make sure you understand the difference between the two."* What are those differences? Paul further explains using a list of markers that detail the old ways of how they lived and operated – the practices that came out of their formation, the fruit from their trees – and he says "this is the stuff you need to get rid of" including "anger, rage, malicious behaviour, slander," – none of these are exactly practices of belonging are they?

As Paul continues he says in verse 10, to *"put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him."* Now this is not a simple "list of rules" – Paul is imploring the Colossian church to be formed in the person and the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and this formation is an on-going process. "Be renewed as you learn…" Paul says. Formation takes time. We don't arrive at it as soon as we see its relevance or importance. It's something that comes with what the late theologian Eugene Peterson

called *"a long obedience in the same direction."* Just as importantly this is a renewal of ALL things. Christ renews everything including our understanding of what it means to belong and to extend that belonging to one another. In the Colossian church there were many divisions. There were insiders and outsiders based on your ethnicity, your socio-economic status, your gender -- and Paul gets right to the heart of these divisions and what the practice of belonging should look like in the church when he says in v. 11, that *"there is no Jew or Gentile, circumcised or un-circumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave or free…* Paul is saying that we all belong to Jesus and that Jesus is the great equalizer who makes us belong with God's own self and with one another – that dividing wall of hostility has been broken down! (Eph. 2:14 – reference only please)

There are many in our midst here at Cornerstone. And still more that enter our orbit. If we as the family of God are all equal in Christ, we need to ask if this is evident for our brothers and sisters to see? Maybe Paul's list for us wouldn't look quite the same, but what would it look like in our day and age? No favourtism, no popularity contests, making space for those with exceptionalities… to name a few.

Are we marked by the old ways of life without Christ – by division, exclusion, and judgment, or are we intentionally being formed into a family that extends belonging to one another as equals under God? Are we fighting over which denominations are most like Jesus? Are we arguing over what theologians best capture Jesus? Are we bickering over non-essential issues? We must lament together, when the church acts as a reflection of the world instead of reflecting the image of God. When we allow the church to descent into petty arguments, holding grudges, demonizing those with differing theological convictions, ignoring one another's needs – are we not denying the Gospel itself? Are we not saying that we're no different than what the world offers?

Here at Cornerstone we want to be intentional about our continued formation as a church body to live out Christlike practices around belonging. And to that end Paul has more to offer both the Colossian Church and Cornerstone Church. *"Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves* (Paul says, starting in verse 12) *you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each others faults, and forgive anyone who offends you."* This life of belonging (to God and to one another) you notice that it can only be accomplished in close proximity? To clothe ourselves in kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. These practices are only possible if we're walking closely in-step with one another. They are pro-active practices that establish and maintain belonging within our church. We don't need anything bad to happen to practice these things but it positively brings about the belonging and the unity that Christ has created us for.

On the other hand, how can mercy and forgiveness be manifest if we aren't close enough to step on each others toes in the first place? But that can happen when people care – when we're passionate, when we're all-in on living out the ways of Jesus. We do that together – we get shoulder to shoulder with one another and sometimes that's going to result in conflict of a kind. And let's face it, we're all prone to fall short or even choose our own way in a given moment or time. Paul is not saying that belonging means that everyone will think and act the exact same all the time or that we won't ever put a foot wrong. Paul knows that even the church community will experience some friction. These attributes Paul has listed are both pro-active and reactive, but both require us to be walking closely together, extending belonging to all members of our collective body.

Our second act is 2. **Practicing belonging to the outsider**

The belonging that we offer to one another is itself a missional expression to the world. As a people formed into the image and likeness of God as well as a people living out Kingdom values together, we don't do this in secret but before a watching world and sometimes, that world comes to us. Sometimes even on a Sunday morning. For all the cultural shifts that have taken place over the past 30 years, with all the rhetoric that we should keep our faith private we still open our doors to all people. Churches everywhere have signs out front that say *"all are welcome"* and although this is good and true it unfortunately isn't always reflected when someone gathers up the courage to give church a try.

Ed Stetzer, who is the Dean of Leadership and Christian Ministry at Talbot School of Theology, has written and spoken frequently of the traditional ways in which churches have interacted with newcomers to their church, and these ways are characterized by the "Three B's."

BEHAVE, BELIEVE, BELONG

So when an outsider shows up to church the first thing they need to know is that they ought to behave. The church says, *"look, you're new here, we've got a good thing going on and if you're going to be part of us then you've got to clean up your life first. Don't do anything we wouldn't do. There's no space here for people who don't have their lives in order. Also, we don't allow coffee in the building, we don't dance when we sing, and do you see that cushion on the pew over there? You can't sit there because that's where Mrs. Henderson sits."* (We like the idea of welcoming outsiders but not so much when they disrupt the status quo).

The second "B" is to believe, which of course we all hope that anyone who hears the good news about Jesus will do – to put their faith in Christ and become part of the family of God.

This is not a bad practice of course, as God desires that all people would come to this saving faith and join God on mission in the world.

Then finally, if you've managed to get through the first two, the final "B" is to belong. Jump through the first two hoops of Behaving and Believing, and then you will be extended the blessing of Belonging.

This however, is not Jesus' model for belonging. Jesus doesn't first expect that people will have their ducks in a row before they can encounter him. And so, Stetzer says, we need to flip these three "B's" around, putting belonging at the front, welcoming the outsider into a community that is being formed into the image of Christ himself, and then focusing on believing and behaving (or what I would call, BECOMING – formed into the image of God themselves).

God has been clear about His love for outsiders – often referred to in the Scriptures as strangers and foreigners – right from the start. In Deuteronomy 10:17-19 God says to Israel, *"For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt."*

Israel are given two reasons for welcoming outsiders. The first is that they too were once the outsiders. And God loved them. But more importantly, God loves the outsider! It's not just when the Israelites as outsiders in Egypt, but God loves all people who are outsiders and here commands His people to love them as well.

Our third practice of belonging is 3. **Practicing belonging in our neighbourhoods**

It's here that we come to Luke 19 and Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus. What differentiates this practice from the other two is the setting. This practice of belonging doesn't have to do with the people who come to Cornerstone Centre, but the people who are our neighbours, colleagues, classmates, and friends. The ones who don't plan on going to church but are still longing to belong.

Although Jesus spent considerable time in the synagogues his ministry certainly wasn't limited to such a place. In fact Jesus spent a lot of time outside the walls and among the people, which is where we find him in Luke 19 – verse 1 says that *"Jesus entered (the city of) Jericho and made his way through the town."* Luke goes on to introduce Zacchaeus, a tax collector, who was in the crowd and hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus. It's important to emphasize that, as a tax collector, Zacchaeus didn't belong. His own people hated him for taking their money and giving it to their oppressors – the Roman Empire. They were just

using Zacchaeus to carry out their will – so he had no affinity with the empire either. Zacchaeus had essentially traded in his desire for belonging in order to get rich. Perhaps assuming that Jesus would be like everyone else in his life, Zacchaeus doesn't try to push through the crowd to get to Jesus – why would Jesus have any interest in him? Instead he decides to climb a tree. It's enough for him just to see this Jesus guy.

But then something incredible happens. Jesus spots Zacchaeus and calls out to him by name; *"Zacchaeus, quick, come down! I must be a guest at your home today."* This is a different way of extending belonging. Elsewhere Jesus says, "come to me" (Matthew 11:28) reference only please… but here he says, "I am coming to you." We might call this practice "reverse-belonging." Jesus is not saying here that Zacchaeus belongs in Jesus' life. Jesus is saying to Zacchaeus, "I belong in your life." This encounter was the kind that could only happen on the streets because Zacchaeus knew his lot in life. He simply didn't belong and there was no use trying to find it anywhere. But through the presence and ministry of Jesus Christ, Zacchaeus knew what it meant to belong. Not only that but this serves also as a tangible example of BELONG, BELIEVE, BEHAVE/BECOMING, because immediately after Zacchaeus has welcomed Jesus into his home *"with excitement and joy",* he declares that he will give half of his wealth away to the poor and repay (with interest) anyone who he has cheated. Jesus says, incredibly, *"Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham."*

When I was a teenager I felt very much like an outsider. I grew up in the church but I was getting into a lot of trouble. I felt like I didn't fit in at school and because I didn't fit in at church either, I was an outcast. I failed the 8th grade and was held back but I thought that I'd be accepted into the Sr. High Youth Ministry with my friends, but when I showed up the first week I was turned away. I tried to find my footing with my school friends but I was constantly jumping through hoops I didn't want to jump through just to try and make it work, and it didn't. Even the Youth Pastor seemed to be fed up with me and to be fair, maybe I would have been fed up with me too. But then our church got a new Youth Pastor and from day one he made sure I knew that I belonged. That was the beginning for me. It starts with belonging.

So the three practices of belonging that help to further form us into the image and likeness of Jesus are; practicing belonging in the church, practicing belonging to the outsider, and practicing belonging in our neighbourhoods.

Now, if we're going to extend belonging to those among us in here and out there, what are the tools that will help us on the road?

First, we need to have the eyes to see. Zacchaeus thought his little lookout was one-way. He'd get the glimpse of Jesus that he wanted. But Jesus had the eyes to see him up in that tree. Jesus saw Zacchaeus and he took notice of Zacchaeus. We need to have eyes like Jesus, to see the people around us who are searching for true belonging.

Secondly, we need to remember what it feels like not to belong. In whatever setting, whatever stage of life we all desire for belonging. The great irony of belonging is that you need someone else in order to belong. You can't belong by yourself. That means that if you're searching for belonging you have to put yourself out there so that people can see you and affirm that you belong. That's really hard, especially if we're even just a little unsure that it may not be reciprocated. You know you can try and fake it and act like someone you're not in order to belong, but then you also know that others aren't really accepting you for who you are. So we need to handle other people's vulnerability with kindness, gentleness, humility, and patience, just as Paul says in Col. 3:12.

Finally, remember that small acts have big impacts. I remember as a young man I was serving as an adult leader in a youth ministry that was seeing a lot of unchurched kids. One such kid showed up one week and we had a small chat and I hoped we'd see him again. Next week he showed up and I called out to him. "You remembered my name?!" he said with a big smile on his face. We can sometimes discount the little things but extending belonging doesn't need to be earth-shattering stuff. Did that small little encounter completely encapsulate what true belonging in Jesus is? Of course not. But it was enough to gain a hearing. It was enough to get started on the way to what true belonging really is.

As we are continually formed into the image and likeness of Jesus, may we always see with Jesus' eyes, may we clothe ourselves with the fruits of the Spirit, and may we look for every opportunity big or small to extend belonging to those around us. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we belong to you. And you belong to us. There is no greater joy than to be part of your family. And Lord we thank you that you invite everyone to be part of this family. Help us Lord to foster belonging here at Cornerstone Church and to extend that belonging in the workplace, in our schools, in our parks, and in the marketplace. Form us Lord, into your likeness. Amen.

Benediction (Col. 3:16-17):

Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father. (Go in peace)