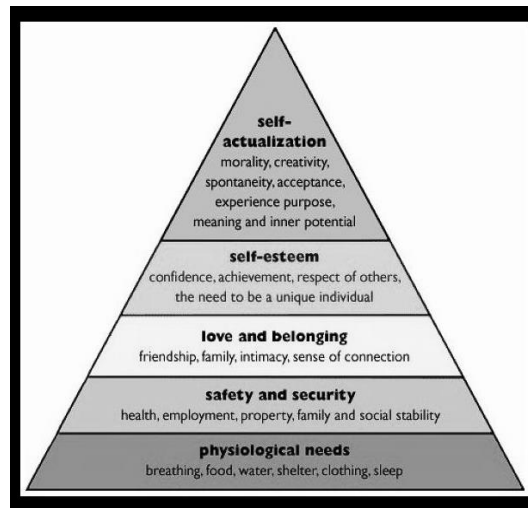


THE SCIENCE OF BELONGING



Scripture:

Psalm 16

¹Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. ²I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.”

³As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight.

⁴Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips.

⁵The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. ⁶The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.

⁷I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. ⁸I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

⁹Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. ¹⁰For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.

¹¹You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

The book of Hebrews is one of my favorites in all the Bible. It spells out faith in Christ very clearly and eloquently.

Hebrews 10:23-25

²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



Let's do an experiment and split up into three groups: the right side, the left side and the choir. Okay, this right side: Close your eyes for a few seconds and think of a group to which you feel like

you really belong. You are definitely a valued part of that group.

Now this left side: Think about how much you value your friends in general.

And the choir: Think about all the help that others have given you in the past year. Now be mindful for a moment, after thinking about this. How much meaning does life seem to have for you, or how much meaning does your life have? Open your eyes.

If you were really in the tested groups the researchers would have given you some detailed questions about how much meaning life seems to have for you after you thought about these three topics. But this gives you an idea of how that test was given.

Now guess which group felt life had the most meaning.

It was the first group, the one that thought about groups of people where they felt they really belonged. Those folks felt they got the most meaning out of life. Surprised?

WE NEED TO BE PART OF A COMMUNITY

Whether we realize it or not, one of our main goals in life is to find meaning by identifying with a group or two. We all need to be a part of a community.

Feeling that life is meaningful through group identity is important because:

- People who feel life is meaningful are more likely to be in both good psychological and good physical health.
- People who feel life isn't meaningful are more likely to be stressed, depressed, and some may become suicidal if they feel they don't belong anywhere.

Meaning is found in various ways, and the avenue of the church and religion is one of the more common ways people find meaning and belonging.

The Science of Belonging began with the creation of human beings in Genesis chapter 2. We were made to be together.

“The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

We were all created to live socially and not in isolation from one another. It is in our DNA to thrive communally.

ANCESTRY

How many of you have looked up your ancestry and traced it back to Europe or Africa or the Mediterranean? I looked up our Scottish roots recently. We often get a sense of pride in our

belongingness when we discover how our ancestors survived by migrating to the United States. I'm not related to royalty. In fact, when we visited the Burns Museum in Alloway, Scotland, I asked the cashier at the gift shop if I could look in their phone book. When I found there were no Alloways listed, I asked her what happened to all the Alloways in Alloway, Scotland? She said, "Oh, we ran them off long ago!" So it depends on the group if you will feel good about belonging to it.

MASLOW'S HEIRARCHY OF NEEDS

The desire for social bonds and connections with others has a long history in psychological research. There is the need for affection between people, the need for positive regard from others, belongingness, and the need for relatedness.

Psychologically humans don't develop well if we don't accomplish certain social goals and satisfy our social need for belonging.

See the illustration with the sermon title on page one. This pyramid called Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was developed in 1943 and it is still considered a valid method for understanding how a person progresses towards the highest level of development which is called self-actualization.

The first level is the basic needs of air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sleep. The second level is based on safety, protection from the environment, security, order, stability, and a freedom from fear. The third level is love and belonging which includes friendship, intimacy, affection, love, a sense of connection and acceptance.

The next two levels of self-esteem and self-actualization are dependent upon the achievement of the other levels. But self-actualization is truly a long continual process of becoming. Maslow believed only two percent of people become fully self-actualized. He didn't even consider himself self-actualized. The journey towards self-actualization is often hampered by difficult life experiences such as losing stable housing, child abuse, and loss of financial security and status. Maslow had trouble getting along with his mother who he called narcissistic, opinionated, and mean.

Achieving a sense belonging is essential for healthy psychological development. If you don't identify as belonging to something significant in your life, then your self-esteem suffers.

In 1968, Maslow wrote that “Beneath most emotional breakdowns lies a need for belongingness, being loved, and respected.”

We all hope to be self-actualized someday. According to Maslow there are certain characteristics common among the self-actualized who have achieved to the top level of psychological development. And even though Maslow considered himself a non-religious humanist it is easy to connect these self-actualization characteristics with advice for living promoted in the Bible.

Some of the Characteristics of self-actualizers are for instance:

1. They perceive reality clearly and can tolerate uncertainty in the future. (The Bible teaches us to have hope and trust God in the midst of uncertainty.)
2. The self-actualized are able to accept themselves and others for what they are. (Love your neighbor as yourself.)
3. Problem-centered (not self-centered). (Humble, thinking of helping others before yourself as our Bible teaches.)
4. Unusual sense of humor. (Ecclesiastes says: There’s a time to laugh, and a time to cry.)
5. Resistant to enculturation. (We are to think of ourselves as “not of this world” but to focus on building up the kingdom of God.)
6. Concerned for the welfare of humanity; (Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Matthew 7:12)
7. Establish deep satisfying interpersonal relationships. (If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Romans 12:18)
8. Democratic attitudes. (Do Justice, Love Kindness and Walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8)
9. Strong moral/ethical standards. (Such as in the Ten Commandments.)

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Maslow found these common characteristics when he studied famous people that he deemed self-actualized: Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, William James, Gandhi, Beethoven, Eleanor Roosevelt and Mother Teresa.

In another analysis of the self-actualized, Maslow found that the self-actualized all possessed an appreciation for truth, beauty, goodness, and wholeness. All qualities we appreciate in Christianity as well.

In other research, social scientists concluded that the most important needs that must be satisfied for healthy development are the social ones. One evaluator of Maslow’s theory said, “Even when we are hungry and have no food, for instance, we can find happiness with our friends. They’re like vitamins.”

THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

That is where today’s scripture passage comes in again. The book of Hebrews was a letter reaching out to the “Jews for Jesus” of those days, a group of new Christ followers, living near Rome, who wanted to keep their Jewish traditions and just add on faith in Jesus. The Hebrews writer respected this community’s effort to not let go of their heritage and identity as Jews. The author of Hebrews seemed to realize it gave them a strong sense of belonging and purpose. But he was also trying to help them understand they had a new way of belonging in Jesus Christ.

The author of this passage reminds this Christian community how important it is to meet together and to encourage one another in love and good deeds. That is essentially what the church is to be: a gathering community that worships God together, shares God’s love, imitates Christ with good deeds, and encourages one another as we journey in this life together.

BELONGING TO A GREATER CAUSE

We all need church. Besides worshiping God and thanking God for all our many blessings, we are to build up one another in love. That is why it isn’t good enough to just go out and commune with God in Nature or just go to a sports game for belonging. Your team will eventually disappoint. Sure, it is good to do that periodically, but not in place of coming to worship with your church family. We are made to be communal people, who lift up one another in faith, hope, and love. Our connection to God’s love is made manifest in our connection to one another and to those we serve. God will never forsake you.

Belonging to a greater cause such as the mission of the church provides a strong sense of purpose and meaning. When you belong to a Presbyterian church, you belong to an ancient community that

began with the ancestry of Jesus Christ, a community with the same purpose and meaning for over two-thousand years.

And Christian belief is developed through involvement with a community of faith and nurtured within a network of relationships with other believers. The way we connect with each other is central to the good working of our communities of faith. Meeting together is more than a social gathering, it is a celebration of beliefs. Bible studies and worship are a necessary part of keeping the fires of faith brightly burning.

A study of churches in Australia concluded that for many attenders church is like a large, open and welcoming family. But they concluded that to get the full benefit of belonging one must be involved. The study authors said, "Attending and gathering together is important but so is the contribution that each person makes."

As believers, all of us "belong" to Jesus. The book of Galatians says in chapter 3: So, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham...for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

CHURCH OF THE ROSES

Besides belonging to Christ Jesus, we hope you feel a good sense of belonging to this Church of the Roses. For healthy development we all need a place where we can be our authentic selves. Social scientist, Dr. Brene Brown said, "True belonging only happens when we present our authentic imperfect selves to the world. Our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance." So love yourself first and love others.

May you feel blessed from being adopted by Christ and by us into our own little community of faith and hope and love. And may we do all we can to let all the others out there know they are welcome to join us here. We are all meant to be one with no separations or divisions between us around the world. And remember, no matter what, you belong to God because nothing can ever separate you from the unconditional love of God. Nothing!

The book of Hebrews ends with a perfect quote for our Stewardship pledge Sunday that reminds us how to keep our community strong and vital: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." Amen

Benediction: For those who feel they don't belong anywhere, I hope this sacred place can be a sanctuary for healing and wholeness, and a refuge for those who feel broken and rejected.

Let us all embrace this blessing from Hebrews: "Now may the God of peace who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever."

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forever more. Amen



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