

What does it mean to belong?

A provocative question on this Sunday Of Indigenous People's Day weekend. We in this congregation are for the most part not indigenous, not of the Haudenosaunee. And yet here are church sits on land that was taken from the original people of this land by our white forbears.

How is it we belong here? Some might say that we belong here because we have been here a long time. Some would say we belong here because we own the land. Some might say that we don't belong here because the land that we are on was stolen from the original people of this land

This not just a theoretical question Interfaith works at the request of the Mayor has held a series of dialogues of what we as a city should do. Do we officially change the name to Indigenous people's day? Do we change Columbus circle?

And this sermon is not where that decision is going to get made, nor should it.

But it does highlight that we often think that belonging is based on identity. One can be Haudenosaunee or Italian. My ancestors were Irish and so I belong to the group Irish Americans. But I have no connection of relation to that. My family had no customs that we could call Irish, I had no known relative still back in Ireland. I've never even been to Ireland I am no more Irish American than I am Italian American. So really belonging is not simply identity. I think it is easier to name identity.

In our UU faith belonging is really important. If you want to be an official member of this congregation you need to sign the book. I did an informal poll of some other UU ministers - signing the book is what most UU churches do. But why I asked them. Partially it is a thing that started long ago in New England when joining a parish meant you were joining the village. Now it is not that but we have a covenant - promises of how we will be with each other. Signing the book means that you are agreeing to our covenant. And if anyone would like to sign the book this morning I will have it down in coffee hour with me.

We are a people of covenant that is what defines our belonging and our covenant is based on our values and beliefs not our national or cultural identity.

For us belonging is about relationship. It is less about blood than it is about values. It is less about where you have been than where you are going. It is about being with each other in good times and in bad. I have a family - a husband and kids. We have each other's back and that is how we show each other we belong together. I have some very close friends - I call them my chosen family. We have each other's backs that is how we show each other we belong together. I have this community, we have this community, a place where we have each other's back that is how we show each other we belong together

We here at First UU fly two flags by our church doors - Black Lives Matter and the Pride flag. Our congregation voted to do that. Because it is a way of telling the world what we value and hopefully reminding the people who drive by our church that we believe it would be a good idea if they lived out those values. We are also telling LGBTQ folx and People of Color that we are trying to be good allies. That we are doing our best to be welcoming.

I have talked to people who drive by our church who smile when they see those flags. Fred Daly who is the pastor at all saints told me that one of his congregants, an African American woman, drives by our church each day and our Black Lives Matter flag reminds her that there is good in this world. But not everyone always has that response.

May Memorial also flies a Pride flag for similar reasons that we do. Last Sunday they found that someone had taken the flag down and burned it and left it on their property. Rev Jo and their president Stephanie Cross called the police and filed a report. They let their people know what happened both by sending an email and posting on Facebook. So of course, the media came and interviewed them.

May Memorial's response was a good one I think. They are clear that they will not be deterred. A flag was up again by the next day I think. They are clear that the damage done to their church is minimal and that LGBTQ folx have a lived experience that the world is a threatening place. And that makes it even more important to remain an openly welcoming place. Colleagues and other churches have offered support to May Memorial. And May is clear that they will continue their social justice work. The first Tuesday of each month they gather on their front lawn next to east Genesee street holding signs supporting love and acceptance, holding signs that protest our governments current agenda.

If this were ever to happen to us - someone destroys one or all of our flags I would have a similar response. This congregation has committed itself to be a preemptive radically inclusive place. That means not only do we welcome folks, not only do we invite folks, but we also think about what we need to do and be before folks show up here in order to be welcoming. We make our building accessible, we provide food that is an allergy free as possible, we have hearing assistive devices, we use microphones, we provide braille copies of hymns and inserts, we put allergy free soap in the bathrooms, we have all gender bathrooms and on and on. We are working hard at this and we are pretty good at it and we are getting better.

And when you side with love you cannot back down when hate shows up. This is when we remain firm, with each other and with May Memorial. We have May's back just like I know May would have our backs if the situation was reversed.

What can we do to show May we are with them? I know where I will be on November 5th at 12 noon. I will be on May Memorials front lawn. I want to encourage you to do the same. They usually have about 20 people out there I think what would it say to May and to the larger community if 100 people showed up? I encourage to, if you have a smart-phone, to take it out right now, look at your calendar for November 5 and see if that is something you have room for in your life. Your work, your daytime life may not allow it but if you get a lunch hour, if you have some flexibility in your work and daytime life put this in your calendar. Feel free to invite a friend or two or three.

We do this because we are Unitarian Universalists, we know there is more love somewhere and We choose to side with love.