

# Belong

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Preacher: Ray Sweet

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, hey, good morning. My name is Ray Sweep from First Christian Church in Greensburg, Indiana. If you'd like to know more about us, you can go to FCCGreensburg.com or you can check out the FCC Greensburg Facebook page.

But hey, thank you so much for tuning in today. Our heart, as always, is to get into the Word of God, but most of all, let that Word get into us and transform us more and more into the image of Christ. Now, when I think of the word belong, there are a couple memories that quickly come to my mind. First was back in 2007. I had graduated from Bible college about a year earlier.

I came to this FCC family to do a year-long internship, and I really got to be a part of a variety of different ministries that helped me to grow. And as that year was ending, I heard about a small country church in northeast Rush County just about probably 35 minutes away.

And I sent in a resume, and it wasn't long before I was sitting down with their elders. And honestly, it went well. So the next step was to go and preach a message. And I remember we walked in as nervous as can be.

[ 1 : 13 ] And immediately, Bethany, who was my fiance at the time, she knew several people from working at Mahoning Valley Camp. And that was sort of the icebreaker. There was an immediate connection, and they ended up hiring that wet-behind-the-ears 23-year-old.

And I'll tell you, they were a warm and loving church. And it wasn't long before we were laughing together, being invited over to family get-togethers, working together in ministry, seeing God do incredible things.

And I remember Bethany and I just looking at each other just a few months in as we had just gotten married. We were sitting in the church parsonage where we lived, and we said, wow, this is home. We belong in this church family. And I'm thankful for the eight years that we spent there and for the wonderful relationships we still have with some incredible people.

And then I can't help but think of another instance that made me feel like I belonged back in probably 2019. We had come back here to Greensburg in 18 to start that year-and-a-half process of transitioning into that lead pastor role.

[ 2 : 24 ] Pastor Danny was going to be retiring. And as that day was getting close, I remember a faithful member of our church pulling me to the side. And they said, Ray, we love Danny.

We hate to see him retire. But there's no one else we want to see fill his shoes more than you. You're going to do a great job. Man, talk about powerful words that just made us feel like we belonged when it was easy to second-guess yourself.

See, today we're going to talk about the importance of belonging. But before we do that, let me welcome you back to our series called DNA. And while I normally like to preach a more expository-type series where we just jump into a book of the Bible and we walk through it verse by verse, it's important that we take these first couple months of 2025 to talk about our new vision, mission, and values that our eldership has been praying and working through this last year.

See, the reason we're calling this series DNA is because in its simplest form, DNA is who you are. And as you know, each church has its own unique spiritual DNA.

Because while we are meant to follow the same word of God, each church may be led by the Holy Spirit to focus in different areas. For instance, we have a church in town here where almost everything they do revolves around their calling to minister to the addiction community.

[ 3 : 48 ] And God has used that body of believers to impact so many lives. For us, many would say that our niche has been our family focus. If you want a church family that will pour God's word into your children, into your youth, FCC has that reputation.

And I'll tell you, I'd take Mitch, our youth pastor, and Lynn, our children's director, and all of our volunteers every day of the week and twice on Sunday. They do a fantastic job because they truly care about discipling our kids in Christ.

And I don't say that to brag. I say it because we believe in this so much that we pour in excellence to make an impact for the kingdom. Some would say that it's become our niche, part of our spiritual DNA.

Last week, we started this series off talking about the why, the vision. Why do we at FCC do what we do? What is the passion that drives us? And honestly, it's this simple.

Jesus first. And when you look around our American culture and people we interact with every day, listen, many of them have Jesus as a part of their bucket.

[ 5 : 02 ] He's one of many important things in life. And yet God's word makes it clear in Matthew 6.33 that we are to seek first his righteousness and his kingdom.

And that's when everything falls into place. So our vision is to make Jesus first in everything. In my own heart, with my family, in my marriage, in parenting, in how I treat my neighbor, with my time, talent, and treasures, in my politics, with my views on controversial topics, to prioritize what Jesus made first, the truth of God's word, ministering to the lost among us, growing up healthy disciples, in everything Jesus first.

His word, his will, his ways. That's our why, our vision. And then today, in the next two Sundays, we're going to talk about our how, our mission.

If our why is Jesus first, how do we accomplish that? Well, here's how. Belong to, believe in, become like Jesus.

Or you could simplify, and you could say, our how is to belong, believe, and become. So let's take the first one today, and let's break it down, because I have a feeling that as I shared a couple stories in my own life, of when I felt like I truly belonged, I bet that sparks some of your own memories.

[ 6 : 32 ] And let's just take off the mask. Let's just be completely real. Every single person on this planet, that's you, that's me, all of us long to belong.

This is why some people join gangs. And man, I would never be okay with that. But even though this family might be completely unhealthy and destructive and lead them to prison, even to death, they're okay with it because of that sense of family, that sense of belonging it provides.

We were wired to belong. From the most extroverted people among us who are fantastic at having many acquaintances and friends and not knowing a stranger, to even the shyest among us with maybe their one, two, three close friends, and that's all they really want.

See, we all need to belong. This is also why when people visit a church for the first time, which can be a scary experience for sure, but that's why all the studies show that they usually decide whether they'll come back within the first probably six to eight minutes of pulling into the parking lot before the service even starts, before they sing worship songs, hear the preacher, or find out if the snakes are gonna get brought out.

I'm kidding. Instead, what's the most important thing to people is this, this internal question, do I belong?

[ 7 : 53 ] Did anyone notice when I walked in? Did someone care enough to help me find where I was going? When I sat down, did anyone come over and introduce themselves, making us feel welcome, or did they just tell me that I was in their seat?

And there's a phrase that we use here at FCC that I love. It's all over our connection point and our welcome bags when you come into the church. It simply says, welcome home.

And we mean that sincerely in a few different ways. So if you're a note taker and you'd like to follow along with this message, feel free to go to the YouVersion Bible app, Y-O-U version Bible app.

It's a free download. It's incredible. If you go to the menu and you go under events, go to First Christian Church, Greensburg, Indiana, you can see our outline that way. But the first thing I want you to see today is welcome home to Jesus.

Welcome home to Jesus. So grab your Bibles, turn to Luke 15, Luke chapter 15, probably a little more than two-thirds the way through your scriptures, Matthew, Mark, and then you come to Luke, third book of the New Testament.

[ 9 : 08 ] And we're going to start with a parable from Jesus that I'm so very thankful for because man, I was that lost sheep. Luke 15, verse one.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable.

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the 99 in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home.

Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, rejoice with me. I have found my lost sheep. I tell you that in the same way, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Now for you theology buffs, we're talking about convenient grace, which is just a fancy terminology for the love and the grace of Jesus that pursues us even before we know him as our Lord and Savior.

[10:19] For me at 18 years old, it was other college kids at a Bible study where they showed me a tremendous amount of grace because I've never opened a Bible before. They also showed me a sincere devotion to Christ as I saw the teacher of the Bible study and man, she was shining for Jesus.

And then when I started going to church, not long after that, I went to Living Water Ministries here in Greensburg that's been in a few different locations. They currently meet at the movie theater. And I'll tell you, Bill and Tammy Leake, the pastors of that church and their family just welcomed me with open arms.

They loved me in my immaturities and they continued to teach me truth. And they were a constant reminder that you can love Jesus and still have a good sense of humor.

See Romans 5.8 says, but God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. See, one of our greatest desires, and we'll talk a lot more about this next week, is to see people come to know the grace, forgiveness, hope, joy, and freedom that Jesus Christ offers.

There's nothing in this world like having the chains of sin ripped off as we discover life. But to get there, we must help others see that they too have a place with Jesus.

[11:42] They can belong to Him. That He's been pursuing them all this time. And He desires that all, that's you, that's me, that all will come to know Him.

Romans 10.14 and 15 says, how then can they call on the one that they've not believed in? And how can they believe in the one whom they've not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news. So like we said last week, and we'll continue to talk about through this series, we are all about preaching the truth of God's Word in context.

And yet the more I've been in ministry, the more I've learned to stay away, honestly, from both extremes. What I would compare to the Pharisees, the legalistic side, and the Sadducees, the theologically liberal side.

The hardcore in-your-face, add-a-bunch-of-rules-on-top-of-God's Word, self-righteous, we're the only ones who get it, screaming at you for 30 or 40 minutes. That's, you've seen this type. And man, it's almost like they want you to go to hell.

[12:50] The love of Christ does not shine through very well. And then there's the other extreme. Oh, it's okay. God loves you. No judgment. Just do whatever you want.

We'll just preach the fluffy stuff, ignoring truth, justifying what God calls sin, too afraid to preach truth and offend anyone. Instead of allowing the truth to do what it does, to set people free through conviction.

And listen, that way is not okay either. So our goal is to introduce people to Jesus by finding that biblical balance. We're not going to scream at you and create this legalistic environment.

And we're also not going to coddle and make it okay what God says goes against his heart.

Because according to the Word, we leaders, we teachers especially, will be held accountable.

So when people walk in our doors, or they encounter us in public, our heart is to live and worship and care for our neighbor in such a way that they can see that they are loved by the Lord, that they can belong, that they can find belonging in Christ.

[13:56] We want to welcome them home to a biblical Jesus. And then next, welcome home to the family. Welcome home to family. You could write out to the side there, the church.

Now, there was a man who ended up shipwrecked on a deserted island. His family searched to no avail and finally gave up, assuming he drowned.

The guy managed to float to an island there and managed to learn how to survive on his own. And for five years, he lived off the land in the ocean.

Finally, one day, a rescue boat came by and spotted him. As he got on the boat, one of the curious rescue workers saw three huts. And he asked him why he needed multiple huts if he was by himself.

And that's when the guy said, well, the first one was my home, the second, my church. And the guy said, well, what about the third one? He said, oh, that's the church I used to belong to. I once heard somebody say, hey, stop looking for the perfect church and go worship a perfect God with other imperfect people.

[15:01] Or you could say, hey, the church stops being perfect the second you and I walk in, right? While this is taught all throughout the word, in the book of Acts especially, we see Jesus, after his resurrection, give his church a mission and then he ascends back up into heaven.

And as the Holy Spirit came upon those early believers, we see them coming out into the open, preaching the message of hope that is found in Christ. And in that one day at Pentecost, as the power of God was on full display, 3,000 people came to know Christ getting baptized into him. And then to beckon back to a couple weeks ago in the Weirdo Sermon, we see this weird display of community where the people of God are doing life together with this amazing display of unity, selflessness, and purpose.

Actually, let me read that to you starting here in Acts 2.42. It says, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. That's the word of God. And to fellowship.

That means doing life together. And to the breaking of bread. That could be having a meal together or doing the Lord's Supper together. And to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

[16:17] All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. See, the church, not talking about a building even though we're very thankful for ours, but the church, that's the people, the family of God.

That is His design for us to find that belonging that we've been searching for. Of course, we find that first in Jesus. But it's the community of believers that He instituted, that He put in place that helps us grow, providing the encouragement, providing the accountability that we need to truly thrive in our walk with Him.

I've even described Sunday morning corporate worship as sort of a fueling station where it's easy to drive in empty because life can be incredibly hard. But hopefully, through the Word, through that biblical community, through breaking of bread, through prayer, we'll be able to go back into our world with a full tank ready to be His hands and feet.

Now, I like how Hebrews 10, 24 and 25 puts this. It says, And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

[17:41] That's a cool sentence right there. That we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching.

See, it's easy to buy into cultural ideas of church, making it a box that we checked, to make God happy. And yet, I love this quote by David Ruiz when he said, I am dreaming for communities of faith to go on a journey together instead of being satisfied to pull off good meetings.

See, when we belong to Jesus, we are designed to find our support system in His church with other like-minded, believing disciples as we grow and mature in our faith.

And I can't tell you how many times that I have questioned myself. And I've wondered, I think every pastor that I know has done this, where we wonder, should I really be in ministry?

Am I really fit for this? And each time, God sends people into my path to encourage. There's even been times when I got a little too big for my spiritual bridges. And God had to use the church to speak truth and conviction into my heart.

[ 18 : 56 ] There's been instances where I was wounded and I was struggling. Man, pastors know church hurt better than anybody. And man, the church just came around me with prayer and love. And I get it. You're not going to know. You're not going to have a close relationship with everyone. Listen, we averaged 526 people on a Sunday in 2024. You count in the others that consider us their church family.

And the reality is we never have the same group of people here on a Sunday. That's probably 700 to 800 people who call this church family home. No way you're going to get close with that many people.

But you know what? I bet there's at least 5, 10, 20, 40 people who you're going to connect with. Because as the church grows larger, we have to get smaller by finding our people.

Finding that small group, that Bible study, that Sunday school, that men's ministry breakfast or men's ministry event or women's ministry wherever we connect and can grow in Christ.

[ 19 : 59 ] So welcome home to family. And then last, welcome home to your calling. As you may have noticed, I always take the last Sunday of the year off, especially after a very busy Christmas season in December.

This year, we went to a sister church where a former elder of ours is on staff. And even before my family walked into Westport Christian Church, there were people outside who warmly greeted us. We walked in and immediately saw some people we knew. They brought activity bags to our children. A lady even came up and said, hey, I know you're a pastor, but would you like one of our welcome folders? And then after several people came over to welcome us and I got a selfie with George Ouellette, we settled in for the service and there was just a loving, fun, and laid back atmosphere in that church.

And we really enjoyed worshiping with our brothers and sisters in Christ because they get the importance of belonging to a church family. And my hope is that when someone walks in our doors for the first time, that they're going to feel the same way.

And when you walk in these doors for the 2,000th time, I hope you still feel the same way. And you know what? If we expect just the pastors on staff to run around making everyone feel welcomed and loved as a part of the family, then we've missed the boat.

[ 21 : 19 ] It's your mission too. It's your calling as well. Listen, when you get up on Sunday morning and you're getting ready, I want you to pray and ask the Lord to use you to speak love and truth into the church family.

Maybe it's intentionality of seeking out those who look new and introducing yourself. And I don't, and don't listen, don't be scared that you're going to ask them if they're new and they're going to say, no, I've been here for six months.

Where have you been, right? Just say this, hey, I'm not sure we've met before. Have you been coming for a while? And get to know them. They'll let you know. Because when you ask people what made them stick at a church, from my experience, it's not usually we love the preaching or the music was fire.

It's usually stories of this couple that came up to us. We didn't know them from Adam and they poured into us. They even offered to take us and our kids to lunch. Go that extra mile to love those around you because you may have no idea what they're walking through and how the Lord can use your kindness.

And we could talk about all kinds of needs that you're going to find when you encounter your church family because listen, we're all broken vessels in different places in our walk with Jesus. And I like how Romans 12, starting in verse 11, says, never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord.

[ 22 : 41 ] Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse.

Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. You know, my favorite stories to hear about our church family is when someone comes in and says that they were struggling and a person down the pew from them saw their tears and they came over to check on them and they just let loose as that person listened and gently encouraged them in the Lord, even praying over them. Or they saw someone come in looking confused about where to go and they just took it upon themselves to be their personal tour guide. Man, I love it when God's people do that.

See, when you enter worship, you should always have your heart open to minister to those around you and there are going to be times when you need poured into as well. That's what family does. So welcome home to your calling in the church. We all long to belong. And that starts by realizing that you have a God of grace who's been pursuing you all along.

[ 23 : 50 ] That you are loved. That you are welcomed into this church family no matter where you are on your journey. And not only that, but you're also called to be a missionary among this family as we work together to impact our world for Christ.

And it's my prayer, just like the stories that I started off with today about how the body of Christ has made me feel like I belonged, it's my prayer that you can tell your own story of how the church wrapped her arms around you and welcomed you to the family of God.

I hope you feel like you belong. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, Father, we are so very grateful for just how good and loving you are.

How you make us belong regardless of where we've been and what we've done and whatever the situation was, you died for us on the cross and you have a place for us in your kingdom.

So, Father, we just worship you. We thank you for that amazing love that you displayed on the cross and by the empty tomb as you rose from the grave, Jesus, to offer us life on this earth and life eternal.

[ 25 : 11 ] And, Father, I just pray that if there's anyone listening to my voice right now who needs a family to belong, who resides in this Greensburg area or Decatur County or even close, Father, that they can find that family with us, that they can discover that they belong and they have a purpose in this body of believers.

and even if it's not FCC, that there are some great churches in our community where they can belong and they can get plugged in. So, Father, we just pray that you will help us be your hands and your feet and that we can see that Jesus loves us and he's been pursuing us and we can walk in his power and his passion.

Jesus, we love you and we pray all of this in your precious name. God's people said, amen and amen. Hey, just want to offer you this quick invitation this morning.

If you have been listening and maybe just have some faith questions, maybe you have some questions about First Christian Church of Greensburg. Once again, my name is Ray Sweet. I'm the lead pastor here.

Maybe you have some questions. Maybe you want to talk about what it means to give your life to Jesus. Please, let us come alongside you and help you on this journey just like others have done for us. That's what family is all about.

[ 26 : 40 ] So please, reach out. You can do that in a couple ways. You can call the church office. That's 812-663-8488. Once again, 812-663-8488 or you can email me at ray at fccgreensburg.com.

Hey, God bless you and we hope you have a fantastic week.