

A Pilgrim's Sense of Belonging
I Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 4:1-16, I Peter 2:9-10
April 26, 2026

Opening Prayer

I start today with a reminder of what the Holy Spirit tells us through the Apostle Peter. From his first letter.

Peter, writing to God's people who are *living as foreigners*:

Put *all your hope* in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. Live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living. Be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy.

Live in reverent fear of him during your time here as "temporary residents." For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited.

You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth; so now, show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart. For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God.

This is the Good News that was preached to you.

You and I and anyone who calls Christ Lord are temporary residents, aliens and strangers in this world. We are not immigrants seeking to make a home or tourists hoping to make a memory. We are pilgrims who are just passing through, and we carry that perspective wherever we may be.

We are three weeks into a sermon series that explores some of the obvious and hidden stressors that worry us and wear us out. We want to put these stressors into a biblical perspective and so rediscover our true and only source of peace.

Today I want to explore what the Scripture says is true about our spiritual family. This family is the one that fits us perfectly, and gives us a place to fully belong.

Last week David unpacked how a Christian's identity is fixed in Christ and is not replaced by anything we do, feel or want. We are His and everything about us flows from that one fact, including how we understand God's family, the one into which we have been adopted.

Scripture teaches that when we come to faith in Christ, we are rescued out of the kingdom of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's son. We lose citizenship in one kingdom and receive it in another. We become aliens and strangers to one kingdom and family in the other.

This is what Paul told the Gentile Christians living in Ephesus. So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers [to God] and foreigners [in God's kingdom]. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family" (2.19)

Bringing you into His family through Jesus Christ is something God wanted to do and it gave him great pleasure to do it (1:5).

Think of that! God was delighted to adopt you into His family and bring you to Himself. You who were once outside have now been brought in. That's what the text says. Can you take it at face value or is something hindering you from receiving what is true?

If you have placed your trust in Christ, then you are adopted into God's family. That means your old life has gone and the new has come. Our old ways of relating and living don't apply here anymore. We need to learn who we have become and how we are to live in our new family.

Take a moment and let these words from scripture sink in.

John 1:12-13. John is talking about Jesus, who is the Word of God made human.

Yet to all who received him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Romans 8:14-17

¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God...you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶ For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children.

¹⁷ And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory.

As God's adopted child, you are His rightful heir and will inherit everything He has for you. In fact, because you are joined with Christ, you will inherit God's glory! This is what John says in his first letter.

1 John 3:1-2

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

The witness of scripture teaches that we are part of God's family and so carry some amazing rights, privileges and promises. While these things far exceed what we can fully grasp, they do not exceed what we can begin to apply. Through Jesus Christ you and I are given intimate access to God as our father, and to each other as brothers and sisters.

Being in God's family is not an individual thing. It is not about me...it is about us. And what we have received goes far beyond what we can imagine.

This spiritual family bond is more influential than any physical family bond. To say this is not to belittle the bond we have with our physical family. We still honor our parents and are committed to our siblings and children. Saying this does not belittle the physical family. Rather, it elevates the spiritual family to its proper place. Jesus did this in Mark 3.

There was a time when Jesus' family thought He had lost His mind and so they came to take him away and give Him space from the crowds. When Jesus was told that his mother and brothers were there and wanted to see Him, here is how Mark's gospel records what happened. Jesus replied,

"Who are my mother and brothers?" Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:31-35).

In saying this, Jesus elevated the importance of the spiritual family. More important than our relationships, our personality, our careers or anything else we look to for our sense of belonging and identity, we are beloved sons and daughters of the heavenly king, siblings with Jesus Christ, bound together in His family by His Spirit.

Mary McKeever is a member of the Covenant family who has had some experience with who broad and deep this family of God actually is.

MARY'S STORY

Let's play this out a bit.

My foundational identity is that I belong to Christ so everything else in my life comes under and is shaped by this truth. This includes the people with whom I have my closest connections. Those connections vary in depth.

I have a connection with people who became Pittsburgh Steeler fans in the 1970's. Whenever I am with them, we have a great time talking about the glory days with Mean Joe Greene, Lynn Swan and Terry Bradshaw. But that is about as far as it goes.

I have a deeper connection with parents who care for children with special needs. No matter where we may meet there is an immediate bond. We know we are with someone else who "gets it" and understands.

And I have an even deeper relationship with my mother and siblings. I've known them all my life. We have a love and respect for each other that is only deepened by the things we've shared. Yet as powerful as this is, the family of God is much greater still.

The family into which you and I have been adopted is forever. It transcends blood, time and place. Suddenly your family tree gets huge and includes those in Christ from any time and place. It stretches back to the Garden of Eden and stretches forward until Christ returns.

This family transcends ethnicity, culture, language and all those things that we may confuse with our identity. All this is because we share the one and the same Holy Spirit who guarantees that we will share in the one and the same future.

The challenge for us is to embrace the Spirit as our common and primary point of connection with other Christians. It seems easier to let other lesser things like sports, experiences, personality or vocations be our primary relational connection.

Let's play this out a little bit more. Because we carry the same Spirit and are part of the same family, I have a greater connection with a Christian who is an IU fan than I do with a Purdue fan who is not a Christian.

Dare I take it one step further? Because we carry the same Spirit who makes us part of the same family, I have a greater connection with a Christian who holds an opposing political position than I do with a person who agrees with me but is not a Christian.

What Jesus offers is so much more than anything the world can offer. We are bound to one another by the Spirit of Christ through whom we carry the presence of Jesus to one another and to the world. This is, indeed, a very high calling. Ephesians 4 has a lot to say to us here.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul used the example of a body to describe our relationship to one another. 1 Corinthians 12:12-21

¹² The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.

¹⁴ Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body...¹⁸ But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it.

Yet, more than just needing each other, we belong to each other. Romans 12:4-5

⁴ Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, ⁵ so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

I belong to you. You belong to me. We all belong to each other. To belong to someone else means I am joined to them in a profound way.

On the surface a grove of Aspen trees looks like a collection of individual trees but under the surface we see a different reality. Their roots are not just intertwined; they are joined together. These trees all carry the same DNA and are technically the same organism. Though they appear as many, they are one body. They belong to each other.

When one tree is in distress, the rest of the grove shares water and nourishment to help it regain strength. And when all are healthy and those yellow leaves are fluttering in the wind as it blows where it will, it leads an observer to wonder and praise God.

Scripture calls God's family a body, where each part is joined to the others and has a role to play. It is called a temple made of living stones, where each stone is connected to and receives its place from being aligned with the cornerstone of Jesus Christ. It is a flock of sheep protected and provided for by the Good Shepherd. As long as they stay under His watchful eye, they have nothing to fear.

No matter which illustration you use the point is clear. You and I were never designed to go it alone. We were designed to belong to a loving, supportive community of grace, the kind of community that reflects the very character of the One who made us.

But that is not where our culture is today. In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam describes how social connections have been declining for more than 40 years. He identified two kinds of networks: bonding and bridging.

Bonding networks are inward-facing and include people who share a common interest or understanding. Bonding networks reinforce a person's identity that is tied to that group.

Bridging networks are outward-facing and include people who hold different perspectives. Bridging networks practice civil dialogue and collaboration across lines of difference which slows the growth of polarization.

Participation in both kinds of networks has been in decline since the 1970s. This massive loss in social connections is one reason for our personal discomfort. While other factors are also in play, the bottom line is that cultural opportunities to belong are disappearing.

We were made to belong to one another, and God's family is the one place that was designed just for you.

We are pilgrims in a foreign land, but we are not alone. We are connected to others by the Holy Spirit who makes us one. And while some think of Pilgrims as traveling to their

home, the truth is that Jesus is our home and Jesus is always with us. No matter where you are or when you meet, any time you gather with other followers of Christ, you are home.

Some here today have allowed themselves to drift to the periphery of the family. For any number of reasons, you have taken your eyes off of Jesus and so your living stone is no longer aligned with the cornerstone. You have ignored the shepherd's voice, wandered from the flock and so have become vulnerable. You hearing this message is not by accident. It is time to come home.

Others have been so deeply wounded by an experience in the church or in the world that you are not certain you can trust what you see or feel right now. That is okay. The Lord knows. Stay the course. Listen to the Spirit and take whatever steps of faith you can toward the truth the Scripture teaches. Jesus is a safe place. You can come home to Him.

And there are some here who are trying to enter God's body and promises more fully and are struggling to find a way. Don't give up. What the scripture teaches about a place for you and belonging in the family is absolutely true. God has you in this challenging space for a reason and a season. He is doing a work so make your desire known to those around you and watch for God to work.

Finally, there are others who are fully engaged and enjoying the privilege of being in God's family. I celebrate with you and encourage you to look for ways to invite others into the experience you know. What can you do to welcome another pilgrim home?

And one place to begin is right here. The Lord's Supper is a reminder of our status as God's children and a recognition of our unity as His family. In 1 Corinthians 10:17 Paul reminds us that "though we are many, we all eat from one loaf of bread, showing that we are one body."

The service closed by sharing the Eucharist as one body, members who are joined to Christ and belong to one another.