

**HAPPINESS IS...
 BELONGING
 AUGUST 12, 2012**

An old song says, "Happiness is different things to different people."

But for the Christian, happiness is found in some specific areas.

It's not about having more money or accumulating more stuff.

It's not focused on more and greater pleasure.

It's not a matter of prestige or power.

It is, among other things, found in belonging.

Belonging.

Jill and I just spent about ten days on vacation.

We visited old friends in Tennessee,
 drove by Graceland,
 went to the Grand Old Opry,
 and saw the Ozark mountains.
 It was a good, enjoyable time.

But there was a part of it,
 there's always a part of a vacation that, for me, felt strange.
 Because I was not here with you.

We went to church, but it wasn't Northwest Hills.

This is home, the place where I belong.

Today I want to talk about the importance of belonging.

Many years ago in England a circus elephant named Bozo was very popular with the public.

Children especially loved to crowd around his cage and throw him peanuts.

Then there came sudden change in the elephant's personality.

Several times he tried to kill his keeper,
 and when the children came near his cage
 he would charge toward them as if wanting to trample them to death.

It was obvious he would have to be destroyed.

The circus owner, a greedy and crude man,
 decided to stage a public execution of the animal.

He could sell tickets
 and try to recoup some of the cost of losing such a valuable property.

The day came and the huge circus tent was packed.

Bozo, in his cage, was in the center ring.
 Nearby stood a firing squad with high-powered rifles.

The manager, standing near the cage, was about ready to give the signal to fire,
 when out of the crowd came a short, inconspicuous man in a brown derby hat.
 "There is no need for this," he told the manager quietly.

The manager brushed him aside.
 "He is a bad elephant. He must die before he kills someone."

The man insisted, "You are wrong.
 Give me two minutes in the cage alone with him,
 and I will prove you are wrong."

The manager turned and stared in amazement.
 "You will be killed."

"I don't think so. Do I have your permission?"
 The manager was not one to pass up such a dramatic spectacle.
 Even if the man were killed,
 the publicity alone would be worth millions.

"All right, but first you will have to sign a release

absolving the circus of all responsibility."

The little man signed the paper.
 As he removed his coat and hat, preparing to enter the cage,
 the manager told the people what was about to happen.
 A hush fell over the crowd.
 The door to the cage was unlocked,
 the man stepped inside, then the door was locked behind him.
 At the sight of this stranger in his cage
 the elephant threw back his trunk, let out a might roar,
 then bent his head preparing to charge.
 The man stood still, a faint smile on his face,
 as he began to talk quietly to the animal.
 He seemed to be speaking some foreign language.
 Slowly, as the man continued to talk, the elephant raised his head.
 Then the crowd heard an almost piteous cry from the elephant
 as his enormous head began to sway gently from side to side.
 Smiling, the man walked confidently to the animal
 and began to stroke the long trunk.
 All the anger seemed suddenly to have been drained from the elephant.
 He wound his trunk around the man's waist,
 and the two walked slowly around the ring.
 The astounded audience broke out in cheers and clapping.
 After a while the man bade farewell to the elephant and left the cage.
 "He'll be all right now.
 You see, he's an Indian elephant and none of you spoke his language,
 Hindustani.
 I would advise you to get someone around here who speaks Hindustani.
 He was just homesick."
 And with that the little man put on his coat and hat and left.
 The astounded manager looked down at the signed release in his hand.
 The name the man had signed was Rudyard Kipling.

He was homesick.

Happiness is belonging, being at home.

But sometimes the church has not always understood the importance and power of belonging.

Fundamentalist churches might insist you must first get your doctrine straight,
 believe, then behave, in order to belong.

Moralistic churches say you must first straighten up, get your act together,
 behave, then believe, in order to belong.

But Jesus did things in a different order.

In his ministry the order was belong, believe, behave.

Belonging came first.

Think of his call to his first followers.

Did he say, "Believe in right doctrine"?

Did he first insist, "Clean up your act"?

No, he said, "Come follow me."

Some spend time with me; do life with me; be in community with me.

Because of their experiences spending time with him, they came to believe.

They were in awe of him at the transfiguration; (Mt.17:1-8)

they bowed to worship him in a boat after he stilled a storm. (Mt.14:33)

They came to rightly believe he was messiah, the Son of God.

And as they experienced more, they came to believe more.

Then at Pentecost, and the coming of the Holy Spirit,

they were radically changed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

After belonging and believing, their behavior changed.
 They were transformed from cowards to courageous,
 from hiding in an upper room to pouring out into marketplace,
 from whisper to each other to proclaiming Christ to the world.

But first came belonging, having a place in the community of Jesus.

One of the most important things we can do to become the church Jesus calls us to be
 is create a real sense of community.

That includes intentionally including those who are not yet part of the family.

That's why some of Jesus' last words had to do with reaching out to others.

When he gave the Great Commission, he didn't say "Sit."

He didn't say "Stay."

He said, "Go."

Go make disciples of all nations.

Go to them.

Baptizing them.

Baptizing them into Christ,

baptizing them into the community of faith,

marking them as those who belong.

And teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded.

(Mt.28:19-20)

Belong first, then believe and behave.

And it's all outward facing,

with that first word "Go."

Go get others who need to belong just as much as you need to belong.

Today, to help build our sense of belonging, we're launching a new nametag ministry.

It's to help us be more warm and friendly.

Now, I know many of us have this fantasy that NWH is already a warm and friendly congregation.

The truth is, we're warm and friendly with the people we know.

That's just human nature.

But what about those we do not know?

On one of our attendance pads in March,

a couple who was with us for the very first time wrote,

"You really should make your visitors feel more welcome.

We are looking for a church home, but no one welcomed us."

That's a couple we may never get a second chance with.

With the nametag ministry,

every person will be intercepted and greeted.

Long-time member or first-time guest, they'll be encouraged to put on a nametag.

With nametags on, we've got names.

Now I know some of you are crossing your arms and thinking,

"We've never done it that way before."

True. And... what's your point?

You may be thinking, "Everyone knows me."

No, they don't.

"Well, I know everyone."

No, you don't.

"OK, but I know everyone I want to know."

I'll just let Jesus talk to you about that attitude.

We're setting up this ministry because calling someone by name is important.

It means they belong.

They're not just an anonymous someone, but an individual with a name.

Jesus described his relationship with his followers this way,

“The gatekeeper opens the gate for him,
and the sheep listen to his voice.
He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

(Jn.10:3)

He calls his sheep by name, by name.
He knows us not just en mass, but individually.
Jesus knows you, individually.
He has called YOU... by name.

You probably saw that we have a kiosk out front with nametags all over it, in alphabetic order.

We're starting with nametags for every in-town member.

They're disposable stick-on labels,
so it doesn't poke holes in clothing.
There will be new ones printed each week,
so you don't leave it home on your dresser.

Everyone gets a disposable nametag,
because a permanent nametag screams “insider”
and tells those who don't have one that they aren't really “in” yet.

We're asking everyone to wear your disposable name tag.

I'm wearing mine, so you can wear yours, too.

You'll be amazed at how people will begin to call you by name.

I'll confess, I am not good at names.
I've tried every memory trick in the book, to no avail.

But I remember faces.
So when I see a familiar face here or at the grocery store,
I know that I know them.
And I'll walk across the grocery store to chat.
But sometimes I don't know their name.

How many of you can identify with that?

Nametags can help bridge that gap while we're here.
And then we might eventually remember each other's names better
when we're at Starbucks and HEB and Walmart.

The temperature of our fellowship will warm up really quickly.
This has been done in other congregations,
and people who had sat down the pew from each other for years
began to talk to one another for the first time ever.
They hesitated before because they didn't know each other's names.

It can start here when you put on your nametag.

Then there are people who come in the door for the first time.

Not visitors, but guests.

A visitor is sort of an accidental drop-in who catches us off guard.
A guest is someone we invite, someone we want here, someone we welcome.

But for them to really feel, not like a visitor, but like a guest...

Wouldn't it be great if we could call them by name?
A guest will be met by a greeter or usher and offered a nametag.
It will be a disposable stick-on label like everyone else's.
But we'll have to handwrite their name on it.

If guests give us your phone number,
I'll call you Sunday or Monday to see if you'd like us to print a nametag for next Sunday.

If so, the next Sunday you'll find their nametag there on the kiosk,
 right alongside all the rest.
 It means you belong.
 It will make it easier for you to meet them and them to meet you.

Will you help us get this going?

We must not miss the vital importance of relationships.

The entire New Testament picture of what it means to be a follower of Christ
 is wrapped up in the web of relationships known as the church.

So many of the instructions and commands we find in the New Testament
 are about how we should live together in this community.

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.

Honor one another above yourselves.” (Ro.12:10)

“When you come together to eat, wait for each other.” (1Cor.11:33)

“Carry each other's burdens.” (Ga.6:2)

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient,
 bearing with one another in love.” (Ep.4:2)

“Be kind and compassionate to one another,
 forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ep.4:32)

“Bear with each other
 and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.
 Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (Col.3:13)

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ep.5:21)

“Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.” (Col.3:16)

“You have been taught by God to love each other.

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up.
 Always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.”

(1Th.4:9; 5:11, 15)

“Let us consider how we may spur one another on
 toward love and good deeds.” (He.10:24)

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.
 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” (1Pe.4:8-9)

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.
 Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” (1Jn.4:7)

Love one another.

It's about community.

Years ago, when Sam Rayburn was speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives,
 he learned he had terminal cancer.

He announced he was going back to his little home town in Bonham, Texas.

Everyone said to him:

“But we've got the finest facilities in Washington, D. C.

Why go back to that little town?”

He said, "Because in Bohman, Texas,

they know if you're sick and they care when you die.”

It's all about living in community,

making the church home,

where we have a sense of belonging.

That starts by God calling us by name.

But it grows by us getting to know each other's names.

Will you participate with us in helping it grow?