

To Whom Do We Belong?

This new year has me anticipating the summertime departure of my boy who's heading off to a mainland college.

As those of you who have been down this road know, there is sadness mixed with excitement as a young adult ventures out into his future.

Thinking about my son heading out on his own took me back to my leaving home, at the ripe old age of 19.

As the oldest child in the family and the first to leave, it was a pretty tough time for my parents.

As part of the leaving, I made a family album with photos and jokes and the usual assortment of wise cracks (that you've gotten used to here with The Week That Was) -- as a going away present for my Mom and Dad.

And on the inside cover, I put that famous reflection about children.

The one written by Kahil Gibran, responding to a mother's request that he speak to them about children.

And part of what he says is this:

"Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.

They come through you, but not from you, and though they are with you, they belong not to you."

Well, I heard later that my dad ended up in the bathroom crying, something I only saw him do just once before, at his dad's funeral.

I expect I'll be in the bathroom myself this summer when Joey goes...

Why do I ask you to indulge me in this trip down memory lane, with these ruminations of a dad with a soon departing son?

Perhaps because "who we are" and "leaving what is familiar" and "seeking out what we are ultimately called to become" is at the heart of today's gospel.

Here's the story of 12 year old Jesus, who ditches family and friends who are all heading home to Galilee and instead makes his way back to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Frantic parents, searching for three days, enduring two sleepless nights, out of their minds with worry, finally catch up with him, only to be dismissed with: "Don't you know I must be in my Father's house?"

And all of this, it seems to me, poses the central question of our lives:

To whom do we belong?

Jesus grasps from an early age that he belongs not to his mom and dad, nor to his job or profession, nor to a girlfriend or wife, he belongs to God.

To whom do you belong?

Here in Hawaii we often define “belonging” based on our different cultures.

We pride ourselves on our various heritages.

The last 40 years has seen a wonderful rediscovering and reconnecting with the Hawaiian culture among both native Hawaiians and those of us who, although not Hawaiian by blood, share the love of this place and her people with our host population.

Indeed, many of our ethnic groups remain tightly knit, well organized, and powerful forces in our lives.

The Chinese Christian Association has, for over 140 years promoted Christianity and Christian values primarily among the Chinese community, and it continues to generously give financial assistance to those who feel the call to ordained life.

The Chuukese community, many of whom struggle financially, comes together for each and every death, gathering scarce dollars, all to ensure a proper burial back home for loved ones who have died here.

The power of clan and culture to form identities is undeniable and pervasive.

We all have our own experiences with it, and it’s not always a good thing.

On the mainland the siren call of ethnic identity, particularly among white folks, has taken on ominous overtones, with a rise in white nationalist sentiment and too many folks succumbing to division and hate along racial, ethnic and religious lines.

But whether we are bound up in deeply rooted cultural identities that affirm life, or if we are embracing some of its worst inclinations of bigotry and distain, both circumstances are challenged by the One to whom we all belong.

We are all of us invited to seek and eventually enter into a relationship with the Source of all that is; that undefinable, indescribable essence that holds everything within herself, that in which all that is exists.

And while we use the shorthand name of "God," it matters that we constantly remind ourselves that what we actually speak of is undefinable depth, of the deep calling to the deep in us all.

It is

 "...a sense sublime,
 of something far more deeply interfused,
 whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 and the round ocean,
 and the living air,
 and the blue sky,
 and in the mind of man."

 W. Wordsworth

At its root, this ground of all being may be glimpsed though the lens of two simple words: unconditional love.

We all know what love with strings attached feels like.

Most of our experience with love, in either giving it or receiving it, is love with strings attached, and each clan and culture seems to excel at one or more particular types of strings.

Whether it be controlling Jewish or Chinese mothers (a very rare breed I'm told!) or domineering Filipino or Polish fathers, love with strings attached is something we each of us know very well.

But unconditional love, a love that loves not because of what we do or who we are or how we behave, but a love that loves us simply because we are — this is the essence of God.

The whole point of creation is the desire of unconditional love to share herself with her creation.

We exist in order to receive unconditional love.

It's at the heart of Paul's letter today assuring all of humanity that:

"Long before the earth's foundations were laid down, God chose us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love, adopting us into his family through Jesus Christ, taking sheer delight in it all!

And all God asks is that we accept this lavish gift of unconditional love that he gives through the hand of his beloved Son." Ephesians 1:3-4. (The Message, paraphrased).

Unconditional love doesn't mean a love that spares us from illness or death, divorce or betrayal, wars or arguments, fears or abuse.

Unconditional love isn't a better version of Disneyland where everyone is happy, the sun always shines and the air is sparkling clean.

Unconditional love seeks far more **from** us; and it seeks far more **for** us.

Unconditional love calls us out of the still too narrow constraints of clan and culture and into a life that puts complete and ultimate faith in that which calls us from the deep, that which embraces us, that Mystery whom we call God.

It is a risk to be sure, to take everything that comes at us, whether it be childhood traumas or present day riches, whether it be great days or worst days, in every and all circumstances, and to trust, one a day at a time, that all of it is being made into something new, something healing, something powerful, by the love that has hold of every last one of us.

The unconditional love that is the very life force of all that is frees us to leave our clan and cultural caravans, frees us to open our hearts to the searching God, who travels any distance, pays any price, suffers any atrocity, in order to have us, one and all.

I think this is what 12 year old Jesus might be saying to the rabbis in the Temple today.

It's what he means when he tells mom and dad, I have another Father, whose name is freedom.

This is your freedom too.

And so I ask you, fellow travelers:

To whom do you belong?

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