

To Whom Do We Belong?

Some 37 years ago this week I headed out of my family home ready to start life as an adult 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 jokes and other remarks 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 the poem about children.

The one about the poet responding to the 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....." K. Gibran, *The Prophet*.

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

To whom do we belong?

That seems to be the question posed to us by today's gospel story of 12 year old Jesus, who ditches family and friends heading home to Galilee and instead makes his way back to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Frantically searching parents, probably 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?"

To whom do we belong?

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

To whom do you belong?

Here in Hawaii we are deeply bound to our different cultures; with a special and wonderful resurgence in the last 30 years or so in 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.

Over Christmas, we had the great honor of the Kealohas grandson, Liana, open our Polynesian Christmas concert and our Christmas Eve mass with beautiful `oli, chants of praise and thanksgiving.

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

The Chinese Christian Association has, for nearly 140 years promoted Christianity and Christian values primarily among the Chinese community, and it continues to generously give financial assistance to our ministries here.

The many Chinese social groups and organizations are a testimony to the power of cultural identity and values.

The Chuukese community, while economically generally poor, comes together for each and every death, gathers scarce dollars, all to ensure a proper burial back in the islands for loved ones who have died.

The examples here in Hawaii of the power of clan and culture to form identities go on and on.

You all have your own experiences with it.

On the other hand, it seems that on the mainland the call of ethnic cultures seems to have weakened a great deal over the years, transforming into some kind of homogenized "American" culture, best known for flag waving, consumerism and entertainment.

But having left that place over 30 years ago, perhaps I am simply displaying my bias for our island ways....

But whether we are bound up in deeply rooted cultural identities or in the next episode of the Kardashians, the challenge we hear today from the gospel is that none of these things,

not even the very best of these things, can contain who we are nor limit the grasp of the One to whom we belong.

To whom do you belong?

A few weeks ago we talked about coming to understand God not using the word God, but thinking rather of undefinable and unimaginable depth, of the deep calling to the deep in each of us.

Today, I wonder if we can ponder the notion of God once again, not using the word God, but rather considering God as 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 (even rarer I hear) , love with strings attached is something we each of us know every 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 promise of God as revealed in both the Older and Newer Testaments of our faith.

The whole point of creation in the first place is so that unconditional love might share itself with that which unconditional love itself creates.

We exist in order to be the very people who can receive unconditional love.

We hear it in the promises of Jeremiah, who, caught up in the spirit, foresees the day when:

the LORD has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.
They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and over the young of the flock and the herd;
their life shall become like a watered garden,
and they shall never languish again.

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 slicked up version of Disneyland where everyone is happy, the sun always shines and the air is always 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, of identity tied up as husband or wife, child or parent, club member or clergyman, and into a life that puts complete and ultimate faith in that which calls us from the deep, that which embraces us with unconditional love, 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 day at a time, that all of it is being made into something new, something healing, something powerful, by the unconditional love that has hold of every last one of you, and of me too.

We are all of us free to leave our family caravans, to leave the expectations of spouses and parents and bosses and cultures, free 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.

This is your freedom as Christians.

And so I ask you, fellow believers:

To whom do you belong?

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