

Things I Wish Jesus Hadn't Said - Belonging to God

Lessons: John 8:31-58 (excerpted)

Not too long ago, but before Elisabeth was born, I was out in a crowded store. Target, probably, I don't remember. Children were running around, beleaguered mothers were steadfastly ignoring the squalling babies, whining and begging filled the air. Okay, yes, the whining and begging came from the mothers, but you get the idea.

In the midst of the bedlam, an older woman came up to one of the more animated children and asked, pointedly, "Who do you belong to?" The child was taken aback, puzzled by the question, and by the force of his questioner's voice. The mother was engrossed some feet away, so was startled when the formerly freewheeling and willful child came running up to her and clung to her leg.

Who do you belong to? You don't hear that much anymore. In my experience, that question has always been a signal of disapproval, not that I ever heard it directed toward me, of course. It was disapproval that came from strangers, of course: your family knows who you belong to. Maybe we don't hear it so much because strangers are less likely to admonish children than they used to be; perhaps it's because we feel disconnected from one another, not accountable for and to each other. Still, it's not a pleasant question, and I wish Jesus hadn't said it. When you hear it, you know that "Who do you belong to?" means "who is responsible for you" or "who can we blame for your behavior."

Who can we blame for your behavior? We don't ask that of adults – we think that adults should be taking the blame and consequences for our own conduct. We do ask it of children, who learn to behave from their parents. We know that parents have successfully formed the character of their children when the children automatically do what the parents want, and refrain from doing what the parents don't want them to do.

Who do you belong to? It's not a question of lineage, is it? When someone asks your kid, "who do you belong to", she's not asking "who birthed you" or "do you have any interesting or famous ancestors." She's asking, "who is rearing you, giving you the rules and model of behavior." We generally call that person a "parent". In our common parlance, your "parent" may be the person who parents you and forms your character, rather than your biological birther or begetter.

The tricky bit, is, of course, that children don't learn conduct from being taught; they learn it from having their character molded and formed by the behaviors of the adults around them. So if the parents want to teach the children anything, they have to do it – to model it. And children learn what they live; that's why "do as I say and not as I do" feels hypocritical. Parents live, and discover later what unsavory habits and behaviors we have unconsciously passed on.

If you watch a kid whose parents you know, you can guess which parent (if any) the kid is emulating or reacting to. Kids respond to the influence of the parent, and in that way, you can tell who the parent is (or what kind of person the parent is) by the behavior of the kid. We tend not to judge kids on what they think, but instead on what they do.

Now some of us care what people think as much as we care what people do. Some years back, a colleague of mine angrily spat the words “you are the daughter of the Devil” at me, because I supported full inclusion of LGBT folks in the life of the church. She didn’t know me or my behaviors or my living connection to Christ, but she cared very much what I thought about this particular issue. But as a general rule, most of us care more about what you do with what you think, rather than what you think itself. If what you think leads you to live a fulfilling, loving, reconciling life, more power to you. On the other hand, all the fact-talking in the world won’t make up for a shabby, hateful, or duplicitous life.

Your life tells what you truly believe. Words and opinions are great, so far as they go, but your behavior is what informs others. Conduct and character testify to what you put your faith in. Conduct and character tell us who you belong to. Just like the screaming child in the store or the parent absenting herself from the scene, how we act betrays who we are and whose we are.

For example, you can say you believe in openness and honesty, but if you hide what you’re doing or thinking, or scream at people or retreat instead of dealing with a disagreement, you demonstrate that you may *have an opinion* about openness and honesty, but you don’t *value* it or *practice* it. If you say that you believe in human rights, but pay your employees less than a living wage, there’s at least some cognitive disconnect going on. In those cases, no matter how much you swore up and down that openness, honesty, and human rights matter, we’d have reason to question those statements of belief.

Or to put it another way: You can say that a particular equation works (eg. Circumference of a circle = $2\pi r$) but if you consistently use something else or don’t know how to find the circumference of a circle, we’d have reason to think perhaps you don’t know the equation or its application really. You might know the equation notation – the statement of it – but not really know the equation. Application is the real proof of knowledge or belief.

Jesus was right in line with us on this point. He was pretty clear: Recite and follow all the rules you want, but if living that way doesn’t shape you into a finer person, something has gone drastically awry with the rules themselves or your understanding of them.

That’s why he was always getting attacked by the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the Jewish religious rulers of Jesus’ day, the ones with the power to dictate religious have-tos and do nots. John doesn’t always write “Pharisees” when he’s talking about them;

a lot of time he just writes “Jews”, but he’s talking about the Jewish authorities. Anyway, the Pharisees were very attached to rules of conduct.

They truly cared about following God’s law. God had laid down the law in the five books of the Torah, and the Pharisees thought that faithful Jews should follow God’s law. No problem there. But these particular Jewish religious leaders didn’t live like the law was supposed to lead you to live. They weren’t necessarily loving or just. They didn’t automatically care for the poor and the widows. But they got really bent out of shape over every little law and its shading; moreover, they weren’t very good at prioritizing which laws mattered most and when.

Now Jesus was less a rule-driven guy than an outcome-focused one. He understood that God gave the law to form our character and to shape us into virtuous, loving, and fine people. Where the law doesn’t advance that outcome, Jesus believed we should be listening for the small voice of God to guide us past our legal stuckness.

We see this in a pretty familiar story from John. Jesus forgave the sins of a woman and rescued her from stoning – from having stones thrown at her until she died of the assault. The law dictated this punishment for adultery, so the Pharisees and others who had brought her to be stoned were following the law. They were doing the “right” thing, but following the law didn’t shape them into virtuous, loving people as God wanted them to be. So Jesus steps in. He doesn’t argue the letter of the law with them. Instead, he deftly turns the issue away from obedience to forgiveness, from the law of God to relationship with God. Jesus focuses the crowd’s attention away from what they think, and toward who they are and how they behave.

It probably goes without saying that Jesus’ intervention didn’t go over so well. After all, the Pharisees were the biological descendants of Abraham, who was the recipient of God’s first covenant with the Israelites. By blood and law, they “belonged to” Abraham. They were the people chosen by God, so they didn’t much like this upstart from Nazareth changing things around.

But Jesus wasn’t focusing on that biological lineage, nor on the memorization and meaning of God’s 600-some laws. Instead, Jesus’ gaze was concentrated on what they did with that lineage and that law. Since our actions shape our character; it doesn’t take long before our actions have determined the kind of people we are. And since for Jesus, the kind of people we become by being in relationship with God is everything, what we do matters. And what we do and who we are tells everyone who we belong to.

“I know you are Abraham’s descendants” Jesus said to them. “Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word....If you were Abraham’s children,” said Jesus, “then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things.”

“We are not illegitimate children,” they protested. “The only Father we have is God himself.” (This is not going to help their case... Children learn what they live; the modeling they receive from their parents shapes the people they will become. And so Jesus says)

“If God were your Father, you would love me. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. You are unable to hear what I say.... He who belongs to God hears (*hears and understands and obeys*) what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.”

If you belong to God, you will hear and understand and obey what God says. And if you don't hear and understand and obey what God says, teaches Jesus, you must not belong to God.

If you don't hear and understand and obey what God says, you must not belong to God. Being God's child doesn't come from being born into the right family, or the right race, or the right body, or the right sexual orientation. It's not about saying the right things or knowing the right equations. It's not even about following all the rules to the letter.

Being God's child comes from being willing and able to be shaped by God, to be formed into the kind of being who lives as God wants us to live. Being God's child means that you are being shaped so as to behave as God behaves when God is a human being, when God is Jesus.

Jesus came to teach us and model for us what it means to belong to God. He says: I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. I tell you the truth, if anyone **keeps my word** (*observe, obey... logos - accounting, word, saying, message*), he will never see death.” That is, he will belong to God. God will be his Father.

If we are not hearing and understanding and obeying what God says, it's a sure sign that we don't belong to God.

Little children, who do you belong to? Who do we belong to? We will be known by how we behave. We will be identified by the content and conduct of our character. Let us be identified by our resemblance to God our Father in Jesus. And God's life, your eternal life, right here, right now, in the presence of the creator and sustainer of all things, your life as a child of God will never end.

Amen.