

May 7, 2023
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-7

It's so wonderful to have a baptism. And it's especially wonderful when it's a baby, and we are reminded that all of us, each one of us, are God's babies. We are all children of God, no matter how big we are. We are still learning to share and act thoughtfully. No matter how old we are, we are still children, wanting reassurance that we are loved, wanting to know that we belong somewhere to someone.

In baptism, we all become children. We are witnesses to a divine moment. We see God's family revealed to us. We hear God's voice echoing over the waters, saying: "This child is my beloved. She is a part of my family now and she belongs in my family." This church is committed to being that family for you, Nalani. Together we will have God's name on our heart and God's Spirit in our actions. Together, we will be a place to belong. Especially for those who don't belong. Especially for those who are not a people, the good news is that they become God's people.

Some people are born belonging somewhere. They know their people and their people know them. I grew up in little towns in the Midwest. But I didn't belong to any of them. I wasn't FROM there. My family didn't go back for generations. We didn't play a role in the town's story. We were outsiders, strangers. And we were always being reminded of that. At every social function or community event or high school game, subconsciously, they reinforced that we didn't belong and they did. They shouted out to each other. They publicly broadcast their lives and how they belonged to each other. "Hey Frank, how is your car; did you get it fixed? Yep, it's good as new. How's your brother out in Arizona, Linda Sue?" As a new person, you didn't know the story. You weren't part of their story, and they didn't need you to be.

In the early church, the story of Jesus had changed everything. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob wasn't just for one people, but for all people. The story of Israel, the story of Jewish people was now the story of Gentiles and all those looking for salvation and redemption. All those who didn't belong to God now belonged to the family. Peter wants the church to act like it. In his letter, Peter writes to a church not much

different from ours. It was small. It was dedicated and sincere. It had old-timers and newcomers. But in Peter's church, there were Jewish Christians who believed Jesus was their Jesus. After all, he was part of the Jewish family. And the Gentiles weren't. They didn't belong. But Peter reminds this church that they all belong now. Because of Jesus, they are all part of the story. Because of Jesus, they are all part of the family. Jesus himself didn't fit in. He didn't belong. He was rejected by his own people, and kicked out of his hometown for believing that being family meant something more. He was the stone the workers rejected and tossed aside. But God made him into the cornerstone of a new community. For people who are overlooked and left out and excluded. Peter says, remember where you come from. Remember what it's like to be ignored. Remember, you were not a people. But now you are a people. Remember, you didn't have mercy, but now, you have God's mercy. Remember, you didn't belong anywhere, but now you belong to God.

Because of Jesus, we are a new family. Because of Jesus, there is a place for us. There is room for us at the table. Not because of our family name

or our heritage. Not because we were here first or we get to tell the story. But because of Jesus and his determination to make all of us part of the story. Because God won't be God without us. Peter says, you were outsiders and God brought you in. You were orphans and God adopted you. Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. Whatever category you are in, you are in a new category now. The only one that matters. Child of God. Sibling of Christ. Member of people who have a covenant with the divine.

The way, truth and the life of Jesus is to make those who were not a people into the people of God. To discover, to bless, to love the new family that God has created. All of us who were rejected, all of us who were on the outside, all of us who were nobody, we have been welcomed by God and so we welcome others. We have received mercy and so we help others receive mercy. We have been gathered in from east and west and north and south. And so we make room for others gathered in. We make space in the story. We make space at the table. We make space in the family of God.

When I was in seminary, I was part of a choir that toured to different churches on Sunday mornings. We were like ambassadors for Princeton seminary. And we went to sing in big churches in New Jersey and really big churches in New York City. One Sunday, we went to sing at a maximum-security prison. We couldn't take anything in with us. Not even the hangars for our robes. We went through one locked door after another until we got to the community room which was like a gym. There was no pulpit. No communion table. No baptismal font. There were guards everywhere around us. One by one the prisoners were brought in, mostly black and Hispanic. There was no doubt that this was not a normal church. We sang for them. And we prayed. One of our members preached a sermon. At the end, the men clapped. One raised his hand to speak and was permitted to by the guards. He said, "It means a lot to us that you are here. It feels like the world has forgotten about us. It always feels that way. Thank you for coming today." It struck me right in the heart that God was there. Even there in that prison. And even these were children of God.

Once you was not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you didn't have mercy. But now you have mercy. Once you didn't understand just how big God's grace is, but now you do understand. You have been called from darkness into light and you are part of the family. You, Nalani, you belong. There is a place for you that Jesus has prepared. There is room for you here at the table. Sister, brother, friend, you are one of us.