

4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN EASTER1<sup>ST</sup> LUTHERAN, MARSHALL

ROMANS 1:1-17

*Called to Belong to Jesus Christ*

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

I'm holding an invitation that I recently received. It has some very specific information on it.

1. It's addressed to me – which tells me that **I'm** invited, right? It **also** has my **wife's** name on it, so I know that **she's** invited **too**.
2. It tells me **what** we're invited to – a **party** – so **that** should be fun.
3. The card also says **who** the party's **for**, **where** it'll be **held**, *and* how **long** it will **last**.

You all know what it's like to be invited to something.

In today's bible passage, the Apostle Paul tells the people of the church in Rome that they, too, have received an invitation. Yet it's an invitation to something that's far different from a party that will only be held **once**. Instead, Paul tells these people – along with everyone else in the world – that they – that **WE!** – have been invited to **belong** to Jesus Christ.

*Attend* a party – **belong** to Jesus Christ. It's very important for us to know the difference between *attending* and *belonging*.

I mean, it would be very awkward if I thought that this invitation to *attend* a family's party meant that my wife and I were invited to **become a part of** their family, right? Think of how weird it would be if we showed up at their house with this invitation – **and** all our **clothes** and **belongings** – and tried to **move in** them?!?! I'm guessing they would quickly explain to us that **attending** is **not** the same as **belonging**.

And then it's also true that there are different **levels of belonging**, right?  
**What are some organizations or businesses that you folks belong to that are mostly for your enjoyment or benefit??**

Our benefit/enjoyment

-YMCA (or Meister's gym) – good for us  
 -*Salsa-of-the-Month club* My daughter and son-in-law gave me a three-month subscription to it for Christmas. Every month we'd get a package delivered to our house that held two different kinds of salsa – the only thing I had to do was open the jars and enjoy the spicy flavor.

More engaged belonging – where people count on our participation

-Book club – need to prepare so that others are blessed  
 -Bible Study – ditto  
 -Sports teams, music groups, card clubs, service organizations –  
 Belonging to such groups comes with the strong expectation that we will do our best to help the group accomplish its goal...

Then there are a few to which we may belong in which we are required to participate:

School  
 Job  
 Military  
 Family

Not only is there a significant sense of expectation that we will participate (and work hard at it) – there is also a certain **promise of punishment** if we **fail** to live up to our end of the agreement.

What's the implied threat in each of those institutions?

School – Detention, lower grade, expulsion

Job – lower wage, fewer hours, worse job, firing

Military – Our son went to the Air Force Academy for college. But he didn't just *attend* that school. At the end of their sophomore year, students at the Academy have to choose whether to stay or transfer

to another school. Those who choose to **stay** then **belong** to the Air Force for a number of years to come.

And the Air Force made it very clear about how he was supposed to live – in and out of uniform – as someone who belonged to the Air Force. He had to promise to uphold the constitution, defend the country and follow orders, to name just a few of his duties.

**Family – what are the implications of punishment if we fail to honor what it means to belong to a family?** In addition to all of the things I remember like getting swatted with the wooden spoon, my mouth washed out with soap, being grounded, and given extra jobs to do, the more extreme actions would include being kicked out, a time of separation, or in the extreme: divorce...

**So what kind of *belonging* do you think Paul had in mind when he told the Christians in Rome: *you are called to belong to Jesus Christ?***

The best image I can think of is the one that Jesus mentions in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to John. Says Jesus to his followers:

*<sup>5</sup>I am the vine, **you** are the branches...<sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you **bear much fruit** and **become my disciples**.*

So now that the cold of winter is behind us, and we're well into the planting season, let's talk for a moment about this relationship that Jesus describes – with him as the vine and us as the branches.

He tells us that as people who are called to belong to him, the expectation is that we will bear much fruit, and that when we bear much fruit, God our Father is glorified.

So help me out here – we – who belong to Jesus Christ – have some specific duties to honor, don't we? **Let's name some:**

1. Follow the 10 commandments
2. Love God and our neighbors as ourselves
3. Give thanks in all things
4. Take everything to God in prayer
5. Love our enemies and turn the other cheek
6. Feed those who are hungry, clothe those who are naked, visit those who are sick and in prison, and
7. In **everything** we do – we are to proclaim the good news of God's love for all people in Jesus Christ our Lord.

It's not rocket science – but it's not always easy to bear the kind of fruit that blesses our heavenly Father. The good news is that our belonging to Jesus Christ is not dependent on either the **quality** or the **quantity** of the fruit we produce.

The branch of a fruit vine cannot separate itself from the plant. Moreover, the condition of the fruit is really dependent on the health of the vine – its ability to deliver the life-giving sap that feeds the branches and produces the fruit.

And here's where our belonging to Jesus Christ makes all kinds of sense as branches to a vine. When he says, ***Take and eat, this is my body; and, take and drink, this is my blood***, then we know in the depths of our souls, that he is filling us with the good food that can't help but produce good fruit in our lives. Amen.