9

BELONGING IS THE PROBLEM UNTIL YOU KNOW YOU BELONG TO GOD

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

Osheta Moore is a pastor and teacher who helps people do the work of putting things back together in a broken world by taking seriously the teachings of Jesus. A lot of that work focuses on racial justice. She wrote a book called *Dear White Peacemakers*, and if you haven't read it, you should put this book down and go read that one right now.

In the preface to the book, she tells the story of meeting with a coach at her son's school, along with the principal and his homeroom teacher, too. The coach had called her son the N-word. She tried to explain how hard it had been for their son when they moved to the area, and how his use of the slur had made her son feel unsafe. The coach denied it. Defended himself. Demurred.

Osheta talks about how others wanted her to go for blood. To push for a public reckoning with this coach. To demand his termination. And how she "was going to try to love the coach who called [her] son a horrific word." She wrestles with complicated questions in her own response. She faces the disappointment of others who think she should be more strident in her approach. She wonders if she's naïve. She talks about her desire to seek shalom—peace—and healing when she faces conflict. How she's only looking for love.

If you really start to see God in wider circles—circles that

include even your enemies—you're going to need the next blessing, too. The path will cost you in ways you may not expect, but it's on the other side of those costs that a deeper reward is waiting.

Jesus blesses "the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."*

The peacemakers.

Not the peace*keepers*.

The peacemakers.

This isn't a blessing for us when we're holding things together in a broken status quo. Like I said earlier, sometimes our strategies for holding things together are the very things that keep us from putting things back together. The difference between peacekeeping and peacemaking is a good example of what I mean.

Peacekeeping usually looks like the careful avoidance of any disruption to the current arrangement. Peacekeeping happens in marriages where conflict is never addressed. It happens in families where everyone pretends that Mom or Dad isn't an alcoholic. It happens when we keep acting as if our mental health isn't in the gutter because asking for help feels like the moment when everything might unravel. It happens when we walk into church or show up with our friends with a brave face in the form of a fake smile while everything is falling apart, because who wants to be the downer at the party?

---

* Matthew 5:9.

Peacekeeping happens when we tell people who are suffering in a system that's been built against them to stay silent, to pretend that everything is equitable and fine. It's the euphemism we use to describe troops who are deployed to threaten violence as a way of maintaining a situation that isn't peaceful for the people who endure it every day.

It turns out, of course, that peacekeeping isn't really the word for it though, because this isn't peace. Peace is a word for deep harmony and proper relationship. The New Testament understands peace as something God was doing through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and it doesn't take too much reading in the gospels to discover that Jesus wasn't known for quietly accepting a broken status quo. Everywhere you look in these stories, you see him asking people to wake up and see the current arrangement for what it is. He asks a sick man, "Do you want to get well?" as if to stir up the man's latent discontent.* He walks into the temple and sees a system of exploitation at work in the complicated economics of temple taxes and sacrifices† and decides to flip the tables of the money changers and drive out the merchants with a whip. The "peace" we often keep is just a stable but broken status quo. If the situation isn't one of deep harmony and proper relationship, whatever it is we're keeping, it isn't peace.

However, if avoiding disruption isn't the same thing as

---

* John 5.

† Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19, and John 2.

peacemaking, then choosing to disrupt isn't always peacemaking, either. Sometimes we see a broken status quo and in our pain decide to wage war against anything or anyone that represents the world that has hurt us or others somehow. If peacekeeping isn't the same thing as peacemaking, then we should point out that not all acts of disruption are rooted in peace, either. Some acts of disruption and confrontation are just contemptuous fits of rage. Some of us are addicted to controversy. We don't know how to feel useful if we're not flipping tables. Our personal issues are parading as noble postures but the work isn't rooted in peace, especially when those acts of disruption continue to divide the world between the righteous and the unrighteous, perpetuating the kind of thinking or consciousness that so often breaks the world. Let's talk about that kind of thinking.

Humans are deeply wired for group identity. It's a way we feel safe. This helps explain everything from the passion we have for our team on the field to the dark intensity of the liberal/conservative divide. One way of understanding how we developed this way goes back to the early days of our species, living in a setting where our physical safety was largely dependent on sticking with our people. To not belong was literally an existential threat, and to be with our people was to be protected.

However it is that we ended up like this, this characteristic of humanity can be tested and observed, and when researchers have done that, they've found that we're even more susceptible to group identity than they expected.

The journalist Ezra Klein released a book a few years ago called *Why We're Polarized*, and I can't recommend it highly enough. No matter where you fall politically or theologically, it's an insightful read for anyone trying to understand our current divisions in the US (and with plenty of insights into human nature that apply anywhere). One of his chapters is called "Your Brain on Groups," and it surveys the things we've learned from the field of social psychology about why we're so prone to discrimination and us vs. them thinking. Henri Tajfel is one of the researchers whose work Klein draws on. Tajfel had a personal interest in studying group identity and discrimination: He was a Polish Jew who, when fighting in the French army in 1940, was captured and held as a prisoner of war by the Germans. He knew firsthand what it was like for a group identity to become a liability, and he saw the kind of devastation caused by these tendencies in human nature.

Tajfel had two hypotheses he wanted to test: "The first was that we were so tuned to sort the world into 'us' and 'them' that we would do so based on the lightest of cues. The second was that once we had sorted the world into 'us' and 'them,' we could act with favor toward our group and discriminate against the out-group—even in the absence of any reason to

do so."* His experiments proved his hypotheses more dramatically than he imagined.

To set up the experiment, a group of teenage boys who all knew each other from the same school were brought in and asked to each estimate the number of dots in an image with too many dots to count one by one. They were told this was an experiment to test "visual judgment." Then the boys were asked to participate in another experiment, and they were told by the researchers this second exercise had nothing to do with the first. They were separated into two groups and asked to distribute cash to the other boys. The researchers told them that to make things easy, they would establish the two groups based on which boys in the first experiment underestimated the number of dots and which boys overestimated the number.

Imagine yourself in this situation. You're there with your classmates, and you've each just made a guess at the number of dots you were looking at. Then the researchers tell you you're a part of the "overestimating" group or the "underestimating" group. Then they give you cash and ask you to distribute it to other boys in either group. These groups are made up of your classmates. There are preexisting bonds among the group that have nothing to do with who overestimated or underestimated the number of dots. Do you think you'd be influenced by the flimsy group boundary created artificially by the researchers? These boys were. They showed favor in distributing cash to

* Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, pg. 52.

their fellow over-counters or under-counters and discrimination against the boys in the other group. This totally trivial group distinction was enough to entice these boys into discriminatory behavior.

Tajfel and his team constructed other experiments to see if the results would hold (they did), and they also introduced a new layer. In one experiment, they offered different scenarios for the groups to choose from in the distribution of money: In scenario (A), your group would get more money than your group would get in scenario (B), but in scenario (A) the other group would also get more money. In scenario (B), your group gets less money than it gets in scenario (A), but the other group suffers more. The groups favored scenario (B). They were more interested in having more than the other group than in simply having more. This doesn't just demonstrate a need for group belonging. It shows an instinctual need for our group to beat other groups.

One reason we may be naïve about this group identity stuff is that, in spite of the trivial stakes that inspired it in Tajfel's experiments, much of the time we carry these group identities and observe their boundaries in quiet or subtle ways. Whatever the boundary is—political, racial, religious, ethnic, geographic—when we feel especially safe, we may not even realize it's there. That doesn't mean it isn't baked into the world we've built, with prejudicial systems and problematic structures that maintain group supremacy whether we're aware of it or not. But we don't feel as much need for belonging when we feel safe

because belonging is something we retreat to when we don't. I heard Klein in a podcast interview about his book summarize it like this: "Identity activates under threat."*

If you think about the way polarizing political rhetoric works, it's always fear based. Polarizing leaders tell their people that other people—other groups—are a threat to them, and that they, the leader, will protect them. We can try to step back and see this for how problematic it is, but we're all susceptible to it, too. The research is pretty clear that these tendencies are wired deeply in all of us. This is the level of consciousness that has to be subverted if we're going to put things back together.

There's a moment in the gospels where Jesus does something that has always intrigued me, and the more I've come to understand this research about human nature, the more I think he was dealing with this particular issue.

In the gospel of Luke, the first three chapters are the prelude. They tell the stories of Jesus' conception and birth, and they locate all that action in both the history of the Jewish people and the political context of the first century. When you read in those chapters about Jesus being presented at the temple, or the long list of his genealogy, that's the narrator's way of locating him in the history of the Jewish people. When you

* I wish I could remember what podcast I heard this on.

read in those chapters about the reign of Tiberius Caesar and how Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, that's the narrator's way of locating him in the political context of the first century. It's also a reminder of what I said in the first chapter—Jesus lived in circumstances that were loaded with complications not unlike the world we're living in today.

If the first three chapters are prelude, that makes chapter four the inaugural moment in Jesus' ministry. It's not just one story from all the work he did. Like any inauguration, it sets a theme. You could say it's a story to teach all of us what's going to be required of us if we want to follow him.

In the story, Jesus has just returned from his temptation in the wilderness, which he entered after his baptism. (Hold on to that detail—it'll matter a little later here.) He returns to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit," comes to his hometown of Nazareth, and shows up at the synagogue on the Sabbath. He's handed a scroll of Scripture, and he reads from Isaiah a text that begins:

> *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,*
> *because he has anointed me*
> *to proclaim good news to the poor."*

The Scripture he reads goes on to proclaim "the year of the Lord." There's a lot going on here. These texts are loaded with expectation for Jesus and his people. They come from centuries earlier, but they hold the hope of a future when God would

raise someone up who would bring God's favor to the people. After Jesus finishes reading, he puts down the scroll, and he has the audacity to say, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." He says he's the one through whom this promise will show up.

The people are thrilled. They speak well of him. They say to one another, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" In other words, hometown boy's gonna be the hero.

Then, just six verses later in the story, we read this: "All the people in the synagogue were furious . . . They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff."

What?

In verse 22, they're saying "Amen, preacher!" But by verse 28, they're saying "Kill the preacher!" What happened to transform the congregation from raving fans to a violent mob?

He betrayed their group boundary.

Between the moment when Jesus tells the people that God has anointed him to bring God's favor and the moment when the people try to kill him, he basically says "You're going to ask me to perform a miracle, but the only miracles you'll see are like the ones from the time of Elijah and Elisha . . ." and then he retells two stories from their people's history when Jewish prophets performed miracles for Gentiles. People from another group. Did you catch what happened here?

In the inaugural story of Jesus' ministry—the story that sets the theme—Jesus tells the people that God is here, doing the

things God promised to do, but the activity of God is going to take place beyond the boundaries you've drawn between your group and everyone else.* And they absolutely cannot handle it. We have an instinctual need for our group to beat other groups. When that need is confronted, our group identity gets activated, and we have to purge the person who's threatening it.

Once you notice this theme, it stands out elsewhere in the gospels, too. Later in Luke, in chapter 10, Jesus is asked by a religious expert what's required in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus turns the question back on the expert, who sums it up by saying to love God and love your neighbor. Jesus agrees. Then the expert asks another question: "Who is my neighbor?"

This is a question we're constantly asking whether we realize it or not. It's with us in all our interpersonal conflict. It's with us when we do the othering that I talked about in the last chapter, assuming some people are suspicious when they've given us no real reason to fear. It's with us when we find ourselves having greater empathy for people who look like us than for people who don't. It's with us when we turn a blind eye to

* By the way, stories like this from the gospels have been used to fuel anti-Semitic ideas, painting the Jewish people as xenophobic. But the irony of using a story about Jesus pushing back against group prejudice to justify a group prejudice is staggering. This isn't a story for us to use to cast a group of people in a negative light. It's a story meant to dismantle that very impulse.

discriminatory systems. It's with us when we walk into the voting booth. At its heart, this question seeks a limiting principle on the law of love. It's as if the religious expert is asking Jesus to define just how wide the circle needs to be for him, and it assumes that once that boundary is drawn, he can ignore—or maybe even treat as an enemy—anyone who exists beyond it.

To respond, Jesus tells a story. You've probably heard it before.

He describes a man traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, which was a dangerous road. He's attacked by robbers, stripped, and left for dead. Two different religious figures pass this man on the side of the road, noticing him but failing to intervene. Before we get to the next character who enters the story, we should consider for a moment what it means that they noticed him. What did they actually see?

Maybe they saw an inconvenience. Dealing with a man beaten and left for dead probably meant arriving late at their next destination. It might even cause them to shirk some professional responsibilities that were waiting for them at the end of their trip.

Or maybe they saw something more than an inconvenience. Maybe they saw a threat. This was a dangerous road, known to be stalked by gangs of robbers who lay in wait for victims. A man robbed and left for dead was as good as a sign posted that would have said: "There are threats nearby."

These are at least a couple of the ways we see each other without seeing each other. Ways that we implicitly decide that someone is outside the circle of our compassion. Beyond the

limiting principle of the law of love. Jesus has created a situation that might have given those characters an out. But of course, if you keep listening, you'll see that he's not interested in giving us any kind of exemption on the law of love.

Next, a Samaritan enters the scene. This is a character from a different group. An outsider. Someone who was religiously and ethnically suspect—impure—in the eyes of the people Jesus was talking to. And it's the Samaritan who tends to the needs of the victim on the road.

Sometimes I like to play with this parable when I'm talking to people who are familiar with it. I'll ask them if they remember the setup that Jesus was responding to, and they'll say, "Jesus was talking about loving our neighbors, and someone asked him who is his neighbor."

Great, I'll say. Then I'll ask, what was Jesus' answer?

And sometimes, if I can get them to answer quickly enough, they'll respond, "The Samaritan."

But that's not Jesus' answer to the question "Who is my neighbor?" The trick with this parable is that Jesus essentially refuses to answer the question because *it's not a good question*. It's a question that assumes that a line can be drawn between the people I'm supposed to love and the people I can ignore or dehumanize.

I said above that Jesus "describes a man," but in fact he doesn't really describe the man at all. He doesn't offer any identifying characteristics. We don't know where this guy is from, whether he's rich or poor, whether he's a part of a political-religious

faction like the Zealots or the Pharisees. The character in the parable that stands in as an answer to the expert's question is a non-answer. Jesus knows this guy is doing what all of us do: hoping we can divide the world between those we should love and everyone else. He essentially tells a story to dismantle the religious expert's question and replace it with a better one: *Will you be the one who loves?* And then, as the model citizen in the story Jesus tells, a Samaritan—an outsider—shows up.

It's as if anywhere Jesus senses a group boundary that's being used to keep some people in and others out, he challenges it.

This is a warning for all of us. Everyone wants to be on the home team. We're all carrying group identities within ourselves that we use to define ourselves. When we're feeling safe—or when our group is prospering more than other groups—these identities may be quiet, dormant, in the background of our lives. But when the favor extends to the outsiders who dwell beyond the boundary of our group, we'll be tempted by the same violence that the crowd demonstrated in the synagogue that day.

This is a problem for anyone who starts seeing God in wider circles, especially when those circles come to include people who belong to other groups. This means that this is going to be a problem for peacemakers because we have to subvert this groupishness if we're going to live with deep harmony and proper relationship.

It's so often this group identity stuff that breaks our world. It's clearly wreaking havoc right now. Putting things back together requires us to work against the weaponization of group identity. It calls us to walk out beyond the circled wagons into the no-man's-land between our people and everyone else.

I learned a good word for this territory when I was back in Belfast not long ago. My friend Jonny works with the same Corrymeela community I mentioned in chapter 6 when quoting Pádraig Ó Tuama. Every month Jonny convenes an evening gathering in a pub for music, activism, community, and reflection at the intersection of art, justice, reconciliation, and faith. These are meant to be nights of lament and healing for a place that has been absolutely devastated by the kind of violence I've been talking about here. Northern Ireland endured decades of factional conflict at the end of the last century, and there are still so many wounds there that remain unhealed. They call these monthly events "Borderlands." They're meant to nurture life in the liminal space between groups that have been at war with one another.

The Borderlands are a dangerous place. When you walk beyond the boundary of your own group toward others, you're going to be seen as an enemy by the people you're approaching. Even worse, your own people will brand you a traitor, and there may not be a category for which we have greater scorn than "traitor." This is what happened to Jesus in Luke 4. He wasn't threatened because he had the audacity to claim the title of "anointed" for himself. He was threatened because he had

the bravery to suggest that God's work would happen beyond the boundary of their group.

I've met some legitimate peacemakers in my life. Some of them are members of our church, doing this kind of work right here in South Bend. I've also met them in the places I travel to, places I go to so I can learn how it is that we can put things back together again. And one of the ways I've heard them describe their experience again and again is this: It's *lonely*. Your own people shun you and every other group still doesn't trust you. And if you're really going to maintain this peacemaking posture in the world, even if the group you came from would have you back or the groups you're reaching out to would fold you in, you may have to resist those opportunities, because inclusion so often comes with strings attached, demanding your loyalty to the people in one group at the expense of your love for others. You have to maintain some kind of independence from all this groupish stuff if you're going to keep making peace. This is where the second half of the seventh blessing, where Jesus says the peacemakers will be called children of God, turns out to be so important.

Remember when I said the scene from Luke 4 with Jesus in the synagogue happened right after Jesus returned from his temptation in the wilderness, which he entered after his baptism? This is important for what we're talking about.

In Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, he's presented with three challenges. The devil confronts his hunger and tells him to cause stones to become bread; the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will bow down to him; and the devil brings him to the roof of the temple and tells him to throw himself down so that God will send angels to catch him. We could argue all day about what the Bible means by "the devil" and whether a guy with horns on his head was out there messing with Jesus. But there are more interesting things going on here, like the thread that's woven through all three temptations: The devil begins each challenge by saying, "If you are the son of God . . ."

Right before these temptations, Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River. When he came up out of the water, God spoke from heaven and said, "You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."* Everything that happens in Jesus' adult life and ministry, from the temptations in the wilderness to the teachings in the sermon on the mount, from healings and confrontations with power to his death and resurrection, is preceded by this experience: Jesus has a firsthand encounter with his belonging in God the Father.

Jesus was baptized not just in water but in Divine belonging. He knew something in that moment—in his spirit, in his body, in his mind, with every part of himself—that would sustain him in every other moment.

---

* Luke 4:22.

There is a kind of belonging that feels good but that plants the seeds of violence in all of us. It enters our experience at the reptilian base of the brain where things like fight or flight (or fawn) come from. It locks us in at one level of consciousness and resists any movement toward anything higher or better. It's the raw material from which prejudice comes. This kind of belonging must have tempted Jesus when the crowd at the synagogue cheered for him.

But there is another kind of belonging that we have access to.

Divine belonging doesn't get to you at the base of the brain stem. It emanates from a deeper place within. It's strengthened with every step we take into deeper communion with our own souls, since it's in that deep place within where we meet God. It's also on offer with every step we take into the Borderlands.

Like with some of these other blessings, I've come to believe you can access its promise from either end. We can be formed more and more deeply in our knowledge of our belonging with God. The practices of Christians through the centuries, at their best, have often been the kind of thing that helps this knowledge root itself more and more deeply in us. And from that knowledge we can find the strength to walk the sometimes lonely path of peace.

But it can also be that we find ourselves in the no-man's-land between the warring factions, taking friendly fire from behind and enemy fire from everyone ahead, where we are stripped bare of any group belonging, and then find ourselves

baptized with a wave of the Spirit who speaks to us and tells us we belong to God.

The reward Jesus promises peacemakers is that they will be called children of God. As beautiful and heartwarming as that sounds, I've come to believe that the reason this is the reward Jesus promises peacemakers is that he knows *no one else will claim them*. If you really gain a vision for God in everyone, not just the people in your group; or if you begin to see how the world will keep breaking as long as we remain addicted to the kind of belonging with our own groups that causes us to see other groups as threats, you're probably going to end up in a wilderness not unlike the one Jesus faced. The group you left will see you as a traitor. The groups you're approaching will still see you as an enemy. But it's out there in that wilderness where you're given the chance to experience your belonging with God.

Those peacemakers I mentioned who talk about how lonely their work is—most of them will also tell you they wouldn't trade that work for the world. If you ask a follow-up question and try to understand why, and if you're waiting for an explanation that would satisfy the survival instincts that most of us are living by on most days, you may not be satisfied with what you hear. But if you listen at another frequency—not just the frequency of fear or ego or comfort, but the frequency of the soul—you may discover that they've found something we're all longing for. To be at home with God is to be at home anywhere.

This is another one of those blessings that first sounds quaint, and then when further considered becomes troubling because it carries within it a knowledge of the difficulty we will face as we try to make peace, but that ultimately turns out to bless and honor at a level of depth and transcendence that shakes the soul.