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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FISHBOWL

John 17:6-12

How do you like to be told what to do? If we need help we like that. Most of us don’t like that feeling of someone else trying to control us, telling us what we can and can’t do. Are you familiar with an RMD, a required minimum distribution? The federal government mandates that if you have retirement funds, when you reach a certain age you must take a minimum amount of money out of those funds every year. I reached that age, but I didn’t want to take the money out. I don’t need it right now and I would prefer to leave it where it is. But the government threatens me with financial penalties if I don’t do what they say. Congress is telling me how to manage my money. Think about that for a minute. Congress, which is responsible for us now having a national debt of $34 trillion, is presuming to tell me how to manage my money. The bill for the debt they have racked up comes to $254,000 per tax payer. Deeply concerned about the galactic sized debt they’ve created, our congressional Einsteins are responding by increasing, yes, increasing, the debt by spending $3 trillion more than the government’s revenues this year! Do you know how big a number a trillion is? If you started spending a million dollars a day beginning the day Jesus was born, you still would not have spent a trillion dollars! That’s a million dollars a day for 2000 years. Yikes. And these financial wizards are adding $3 trillion to the national debt in one year. Oh, yeah, these are just the geniuses who should telling us how to manage our money. Man, I am irked that they are telling me what to do. If we ran out finances the way they run theirs we’d have died of starvation years ago. I would really like to tell Congress to leave me alone and get their own house in order.

We don’t like people telling us what to do. But the Bible has lots of commands about we should live. We want to be free and decide for ourselves. This is a problem. How are we to resolve this? It turns out there is a solution that comes from an angle we might not expect. We will learn about this in John 17:6-12.

WE BELONG TO GOD

Beginning in verse 6 Jesus started praying for his followers. He says to the Father, “I have revealed you to those you gave me out of the world. They were yours, you gave them to me.” We belong to God who has given us to Jesus. At the end of verse 9 you see the same thing when he said, “I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.”

In Christ we belong to God. This is important to know because we need to belong to someone. God has created us with a built in need for relationship. One of the deepest, most powerful needs of the human soul is the need to be loved.

One of the more uncomfortable tenets of the Christian faith is that of the trinity. We can’t understand it. God is one being, but 3 persons. The persons in the trinity interact with each other and love each other. How can that be? We can understand one being, and we can understand 3 persons, but existing as one being with 3 persons is a bridge too far. It sounds like something out of a science fiction movie that has a being with one consciousness but multiple persons. Maybe it’s like the Borg in the old Star Trek movie. Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated. We literally cannot wrap our heads around that. Every time we encounter it we get a little uneasy at best, because it seems impossible. I take comfort in the fact that if I could understand everything about God, it’s likely that I’ve dumbed him down to human size. If God is unlimited, eternal, infinite, my poor human brain is going to hit an error message at some point in trying to understand him.

This unique aspect of God’s being has some big implications for us. God has love relationships as a part of his nature. You cannot have God without those love relationships. Should it surprise us that being made in his image means relationship will also be an integral part of our being?

Just to remind you of how essential being loved is to us, I present for your consideration the Hallmark Channel. How is it possible that there is a TV channel that shows nearly the exact same story almost endlessly? Oh, they change actors, character names, locations and a few details, but the story is the same. You know from the beginning what is going to happen. Would you watch the same football game over and over again? Of course not. Yet people watch the Hallmark Channel in huge numbers. Why do people keep watching those shows? Because they are about love, and people desperately want love. They want to be loved. We all do. We want to belong to someone.

Ask yourself if you want your life to matter. The answer is, of course. Everyone wants their lives to matter. But we must ask, matter to whom? For our lives to matter, they must matter to someone. Oddly, we often are not very clear about who we want our lives to matter to.

We long to be included, accepted, valued, loved and needed. We long for intimacy, to be totally connected to another. Being excluded, being unwanted or rejected, being alone feels like death to our souls. We should not be surprised by this. Go all the way back to the beginning. In Genesis 1-2 you see God creating. He created the heavens and the earth, he said “let there be light,” and there was light, he created the sky and the oceans, the son and the moon, the creatures that swim in the oceans and every living thing on earth. Over and over the account says, “And God saw that it was good.” In Genesis 1:31 it says, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” But there was a fly in the ointment. It shows up in chapter 2. Everything seemed great. But in 2:18 the good train came to an abrupt halt. “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone.’” The one thing in creation that was not good was that the first human being was one of a kind. He was all alone. That wasn’t good because God has created humans in his image, and to not belong to another is against our very nature. We can never be whole that way.

Belonging to someone, being loved by someone, is as necessary to our nature as breathing air, drinking water, and eating to survive. Without it we are not going to flourish. In his book, *Renovation Of The Heart*, philosopher Dallas Willard wrote, “The natural condition of life for human beings is reciprocal rootedness in others.” C. S. Lewis wrote in his book, *The Weight Of Glory,* that every human group has what seems to be an inner circle. He calls it the Inner Ring. He said, “I believe that in all men’s lives…one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside.” He says this desire dominates us.

We all know what he is talking about. I remember a time when I was in high school when it seemed to me that on the weekend everyone was doing some activity, going to some party at someone’s house, and I was not included. I was left out. I’ve mentioned before times when I was in college when I was alone in my dorm room on Saturday night when everyone else was out having fun. All I could do was homework to occupy my time. Who does that? Lonely, loser nerds, that’s who. I had to assume I qualified. Wow that felt bad.

I’ve discovered something strange in many years of ministry. It is that the Inner Ring is mostly an illusion. It appears to exist, but everyone somehow is struggling to feel included. If we are all feeling like we are on the outside, then who is on the inside? Often it is no one. There is no inside. We just think there is. It looks to us like some are on the inside, but it’s actually a mirage. But that ache, that desire to be included, the need for belonging never goes away.

Think about the word lonely. How does that word feel to you? Lonely is one of the saddest words in the English language. Last year the Surgeon General released a report detailing an “epidemic of loneliness” in our nation. It said that loneliness has a negative impact on our emotional, physical and societal health. It significantly increases the risk of premature death. Mother Teresa said “the most terrible poverty is loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted.”

The powerful news of what Jesus says here is we belong to God. We are his. He loves us, and nothing will ever change that. No matter what people do, whether they love us or ignore us, include us or exclude us, God includes us in his inner ring. We are his. In Malachi 3:17 speaking of those who know him and worship him the Lord says, “They will be my treasured possession.” When our grandson, Wesley was younger we used to go on walks to the park with him. He would usually pick up a stick or a rock or two and put these in a place for safe keeping. They were his “treasures.” They weren’t really treasures. They’d be forgotten within minutes of getting home and would never be remembered the next day. They were worthless and were quickly forgotten. But we are God’s treasures.

Treasures are things that have true, lasting value, things that you would never part with. Treasures are things you might put in a safe if you have one, or maybe a safe deposit box at the bank to make sure nothing ever happens to it. That’s because a treasure is precious. That is how God views us in Christ. We are his treasures that are precious to him.

How precious are we to him? Ephesians 1:5 says, in love, God “predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ.” Adoption has become a very powerful image in our family. I have mentioned before that Anna has had a terrible time when she has been pregnant. Her doctor told her after their last child, Bria, was born, that she needed to be done. Another pregnancy could be dangerous for her. Toby and Anna had 3 kids, all of them girls. They were thrilled with all of them, but honestly, they had hoped to have a boy, and now it’s too late. Toby had looked forward to having a son and getting to do all the things with him that I did with Toby, and still do, but that wasn’t going to happen. And then they were contacted by a friend who asked if they would be willing to foster a baby boy. They agreed, and for the past year plus they have had a little boy living with their family. And now they are in the process of adopting him. In less than two months he will become their son forever. This is a powerful thing for all in the family. That little boy was born into a terrible situation and the future for him was not hopeful. He did nothing, but Toby, Anna and their girls loved him and have acted. They are making the adoption happen, and that little boy doesn’t know anything about it, other than that he is loved and is part of a family. He is being given an identity and a place where he will always belong. And that is our situation. We were born into an awful condition and our future was not hopeful. But God acted to adopt us. We did nothing. We were just loved and taken in by God.

Toby and Anna love that little boy. There is no way to measure that. They love him unconditionally and rejoice in him. And that is how God sees us. We are his adopted children, not because we deserved it or did anything to make that happen, but because God loved us and rescued us.

More than anything else, we belong to God. We are included. We matter because we matter to him. He will never fail to love us. He rejoices in the fact that we are now his children. We will come back to the implications of this a bit later, but for now, recognize that in Christ you belong to God.

WE ARE PROTECTED BY GOD

In verse 11 Jesus prayed, “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name.” Later in verse 15 he prayed, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one.” What do you suppose are the chances that the Father would answer Jesus’ prayer? I’d say there is a 100% guarantee that the Father would answer Jesus’ prayer. It is a slam dunk, a no doubt, absolute certainty because he loves his Son and he loves us. Jesus was asking that the Father protect his followers, but those followers were the Father’s treasured possession. Do you protect your treasured possessions? Of course you do.

We have already seen how it’s going to go as we come to the end of our lives. Our kids and grandkids aren’t going to want any of the things we own that we might think highly of. We have this one chair, a tropical themed swivel chair that everybody in our family loves. There may be some squabbling over that one when we are gone. We have a couple of other paintings that we value highly, but all the rest of it is just stuff. So its hard for me to think about treasured possessions.

But we do have some possessions that matter to us. We have a little bit of money saved up. Do we protect it? You bet we do. We have it in the bank or in investment accounts. Our money we have saved up doesn’t actually exist. It's really pretty bizarre. Our money is just ones and zeroes in some computers somewhere. We have it because those computers say we have it. We have no other proof that we do. That makes me a little uneasy. But we do everything we can to protect it. In these accounts it is protected by one of the most annoying aspects of modern life, passwords that I have a terrible time remembering. I have this nightmare than when I die I’m going to approach Peter at the pearly gates and he’s going to ask for my user name and password. “Oh, shoot, I have it written down somewhere.”

I think we can rest assured that God protects his treasured possessions better than we protect ours. We don’t go through life alone and unprotected. Our loving heavenly Father is with us every step of every day, protecting us. Well, hold on. It doesn’t always feel like the Father is doing a very good job protecting us, does it? How was God protecting those first disciples when almost all of them were killed for proclaiming Jesus? Exactly how was God protecting me when I got melanoma? Do you know how serious that is? My dermatologist recently told me that had our treatment options been the same as they were 20 years ago, I’d already be dead. How about those in our church who are dealing with brain tumors, Parkinson’s disease, and many other ailments? Where is God’s protection?

We want God to protect us from anything really bad ever happening to us. We don’t like getting colds or flu or pulled hamstrings or broken bones, but we’d be okay with him allowing that stuff as long as he protects us from the really scary stuff. But we know that can’t be right. Jesus had just told his followers that in this world they would have trouble. So clearly he was not asking the Father to protect them from all troubles. Our experience in the world confirms that, because followers of Jesus go through the same ordeals that unbelievers do.

So in what sense is the Father protecting us? What is he protecting us from if it isn’t the scary stuff of this world? First notice that Jesus asked the Father to protect us from the evil one. His main concern had to do with spiritual attacks. And this makes sense. This is hard for us to grasp, but God is about eternity. He sees our real life as what we have in his eternal kingdom, and what is happening in this world is kind of a preamble. I think of it as kind of like high school. High school is all consuming when you’re in it. Everything that happens to you feels like it has earth shaking importance. Not having the right date to Prom can be life shattering. Then you get out of high school and you look back on that as a lot of trivial, juvenile stuff. I look back on it and think that real life didn’t start until I got out of high school. So it will be with this life. God is protecting us from the evil one who desperately wants to keep us from experiencing the real life to come.

We get a glimpse of this in verse 12. Jesus said about his followers, “None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction.” Jesus had protected them, and none were lost except Judas, whom he said was doomed to destruction from the get go. Judas didn’t experience some terrible accident, disease or other misfortune. He suffered something far worse, the destruction of his soul. That’s what the Father is protecting us from.

What the Father is protecting us from is Satan ripping us from God so that we live totally without regard for him and experience the horror that results. It leads to a lifelong pursuit of an illusion that we can somehow find true life through the stuff of this world. That results in frustration, restlessness, emptiness, anger, bitterness, fear, alienation from others, conflict, hopelessness. Satan wants you to be a lost soul and he would delight in you being lost forever. That is worse than any of the trials of this world, and the Father is protecting you from it.

A few years back CBS news carried a story about a program at the Walter Reed Medical Center aimed at helping wounded warriors recover from the terrible losses they’ve experience in battle. They were using music as a vehicle to aid the recovery. The article described a concert the wounded soldiers performed at Madison Square Garden. A vocalist for the band was Marine Corporal Tim Donley, who lost both legs and the use of his right arm in the explosion of an IED. He sang Leonard Cohen’s haunting song, “Hallelujah” that speaks of a “cold and broken Hallelujah.” He said he thought he understood that song. But then, he said, “My whole life is coming down around my ears. Every dream, every hope I’ve ever had for the future is broken and I don’t know where to turn. It was at that place that God said, ‘Do you still trust me? Do you still believe that I have what’s best for you?’ It was at that moment that I understood ‘Hallelujah.’” Now listen to his summation. He said, “I may be more whole now than I’ve ever been in my life.” He went through terrible suffering and severe loss, but he found life. God was protecting him from a far worse loss.

There is one more unusual and easy to miss note that we need to observe in verse 11. Jesus prayed that the Father would protect his followers by the power of his name. His name stood for all that God is. Names were seen to have power back in that day. The name of God represented his Almighty power. In asking that the name of God would protect his followers he said, “So that they may be one as we are one.”

What Satan wants to do is to destroy our souls and create division and anger between brothers and sisters, to tear them apart. What Jesus wanted was that the Father would protect us so that would not happen to us, so that we could be at peace and be unified with each other.

IMPLICATIONS

REJOICE IN BELONGING TO GOD

We all need to belong. An article in the *New Yorker* magazine not long ago reported a study that was done on carpenter ants. The researchers removed some of the ants from the colony to see how that affected them. They gave those ants all they needed to live. A safe place with food and water. But they discovered a startling fact. The ants that had been taken out of the colony, even though their physical needs were met, lived only one tenth as long as the ants still in the colony. Being disconnected killed them. It does the same to us humans.

This has obvious implications for how we live. It reminds us what a gift we have been given in Christ. We are never alone, he is always with us, and nothing will ever change the fact that we belong to him. We belong no matter what our circumstances might be, because we belong to God.

How much does God really want us and love us? You can tell what matters to people by what they pay for it. I was reminded of this by an unusual encounter we had years ago. We were at the airport about to embark on a much anticipated vacation. But there was a long line to check in to the flight. While in line we struck up a conversation with a nice looking young woman and her kids. They had just spent some time vacationing in San Diego. Now they were moving on to Maui where they were going to stay for a month. I was astounded that they could afford to vacation in Hawaii for a month. Turned out it was more astounding even than that. I asked where they were staying and she informed me they were staying in their vacation home that they own on Maui. I asked what her husband does that made it possible for them to own a vacation home on Maui. She said her husband was a professional wrestler! Her husband was paid ridiculously well, not to wrestle, but to pretend to wrestle. That is crazy, but it tells you what our culture values is entertainment.

What was God willing to pay in order to have us? The answer to that is an ancient cross in first century Judea. Jesus’ whole life was one huge exercise in sacrifice. He left the beauty of glory to live in this broken, evil infested world and finally died in the most horrific way possible. He went through all that in order to gain us and have us belong to him. This is reason to rejoice.

Do you ever feel unnoticed, unimportant, irrelevant, or left out? You are never unnoticed. You are never unimportant. You are never left out, because God has purchased you, delights in you and thinks you are more important than you can even begin to imagine. So remember and rejoice in him.

REMEMBER THE DEMAND OF BELONGING

There is a problem with belonging. It turns out that we have two needs that don’t fit together very well. We have seen the first need, which is the need to belong. That one is so critical to our well being. But the second need is one not mentioned in this passage, but one we need to think about in this context. That second desire is to be free. We want to be free to do whatever we want.

Psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm wrote, “Modern European and American history is centered around the effort to gain freedom from the economic and spiritual shackles that have bound me.” He maintained the central theme of human life is the desire and search to be free. !9th century British lawyer and writer, Robert Ingersoll, said, “What light is to the eyes, what air is to the lungs, what love is to the heart, liberty is to the soul of man.” He claimed we need freedom as badly as we need air.

This pursuit of freedom has morphed in our culture into the desire for autonomy. Autonomy means literally “Self law.” Autonomy is insisting that one have no rules, no laws over him. To be autonomous is to do whatever we please whenever we want. It means having no one who tells us what we can or can’t do. This is the spirit of our age. That spirit is expressed by a line from the hit Disney song *Let It Go.* The words are, “It’s time to see what I can do. To test the limits and break through. No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I’m free!” The message is I’m only free if there are no rules, no rights and wrongs so I can do whatever I please.

That attitude didn’t start with our culture. It is embedded in human programming. It goes all the way beck to the garden of Eden. The humans were given the run of the place and could do whatever they wanted. There was just one rule. Don’t eat the fruit of this one tree. All the rest, all of them, are fine, just not this one. But Eve was there long before Elsa. No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I’m free. Eve believed that one rule was one too many. She had to be free, and she couldn’t be free if God was telling her what she could and couldn’t do. So she promptly broke the one rule.

But here’s where we run into a problem. ***It is impossible to belong and be autonomous***. You can’t have both. Love means limiting yourself. You can’t love a person and be autonomous too. Marriage is the proof. When you marry a person you must promise to forsake all others. You can’t marry a person but insist on the right to do whatever you want. Loving people involves limitations. There’s no way around it.

Last weekend the NFL playoffs were in full swing. There were two big games on Saturday and two on Sunday. I could have watched football a large part of the weekend. I did watch some. But I’m not autonomous. I’m married. I belong to Laurie, which means at times I need to ration my football watching. Laurie loves clothes and bling. She would like to spend ungodly sums of money on them. But she is not autonomous. She is married. She belongs to me, which means she has to ration her clothes buying. Relationship inherently limits freedom. So it is in our relationship with God. We belong to him. We don’t belong just to ourselves. We are his. That means what he wants us to do limits our freedom to do whatever we choose. We live to please him, not just ourselves.

REALIZE FREEDOM IN BELONGING

The crucial truth here is that autonomy is not, in fact, the freedom we need and long for. The real meaning of freedom is found in belonging. I think back to my days in high school and college when at times I felt alone, left out, excluded. I have never felt that again after August 24, 1979. That is because that day Laurie and I got married. Prior to that I was free to do whatever I wanted. Marrying her limited my freedom. Oh, you mean you are no longer free to be all alone and feel like an unwanted nerd and a loser? I may be a nerd and a loser still, but I’m not an unwanted nerd and loser. I’m a loved nerd and loser, which makes me a winner. If this is loss of freedom, then chain me to the wall. I now have freedom to be joyful to a degree and in ways that I never even knew before. I have found a freedom in my relationship with Laurie that I wouldn’t trade for anything.

In Disney’s version of *The Little Mermaid* Ariel longed to be “part of your world.” She wanted to be able to live all day under the sun. She no longer wanted to live under the sea. She wanted to be free to go where she longed to go. Of course there are no mermaids. Okay, true, but imagine a sea creature who wants to escape that under the sea environment. What would happen? The fish would die. A fish that escapes the confining water environment dies. In a TED talk psychologist Barry Schwartz said, “Everybody needs a fishbowl…The absence of a metaphysical fishbowl is a recipe for misery and disaster.”

Consider some environments in which we can test this premise. Imagine driving. There are so many rules that limit your freedom. Suppose you don’t want anyone telling you how to drive. You want your freedom with no restrictions. So you determine you will drive whatever speed you want in any lane you want, paying no attention to stop lights, turning whenever you feel like it. How is that going to turn out? Not well.

Suppose you want to play football, but you want to be free from all those annoying rules? You won’t get to enjoy the game at all. When I was in high school I had a PE teacher who got a little creatively lazy one day. He didn’t want to divide this large class of nearly 100 boys into teams and set up games for all of us. He thought he would create a new game that didn’t have so many rules as most games. He divided us into 2 big teams, put us on the football field, put not 1 but 2 balls on the field and said the only rule was to score we had to move a ball across the goal line. We were free to accomplish that however we wanted. He only did that one time. The result was chaos and mayhem. I guarantee you, no one enjoyed that game.

Here is another example. A recent study from the University of Chicago found what numerous other studies have found. The people who have the most satisfying sex lives are monogamous married couples. Our culture tells us the way to the most fulfilling sex life is through unfettered freedom, sleeping with whomever and whenever you want. But that ends up not being true. True freedom is found in belonging and having our “freedom” bounded by love. Freedom, real freedom, is found in belonging.

It is in our relationship with God that we find true freedom. 2 Corinthians 3:17 says of the Holy Spirit, “where the Spirit is, there is freedom.” Let’s find our freedom in God as we live in relationship with him and live in accord with his will and his commands.