



## Belonging

*The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.*

It was winter, snowing and slippery in downtown St. Paul. As I walked down the sidewalk, I could see in the distance a small, older woman in the crosswalk, moving slowly and carefully into the street with the green light. Not reaching the midway point before the "Do Not Walk" sign began flashing red, she turned and just as slowly retreated to the curb. This happened twice before I got close enough to notice that I knew her.

"Ruth," I called out. "Can we cross the street together?" She was almost 90 and even shorter than I. I knew her to be a vibrant and courageous person, but I imagined how vulnerable and invisible she might feel in the middle of the wide street with the snow coming down and the lights changing and the cars eager to move on. She smiled and slipped her hand into the crook of my elbow, and together we stepped into the crosswalk, doing our best to be visible when the light turned red and we were still slowly making our way toward the opposite curb.

On the most basic level, belonging begins with being seen. Not just with the eyes, but with understanding and recognition – and acceptance of our right to be where we are and who we are and how we are.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs, that pyramid stacking human needs in order of importance, starts with physiological needs (food, shelter, sleep, etc.) as the basics that must be met before all others. Then it moves on to safety, and only in the third tier does it get around to naming our need

for love and belonging. But a growing number of voices today are pointing out that it might not be as simple or sequential as that.

What about the person so isolated by despair and depression they stop caring about eating or living or dying? Or indigenous people anywhere, but at this moment, especially in Brazil's burning rainforest where their homelands and health are at risk because they have not been seen as belonging in Brazil's economic interests? What about the transgender person for whom it is sometimes not safe to be seen as their true self? Or refugees seeking the protection of asylum only to be locked up in the terrifying conditions of detention centers? Or what about the black driver pulled over for a broken taillight, just trying to be seen as a nonthreatening fellow citizen when the officer approaches his window?

It has always been true that we humans need one another. But in a world increasingly and dangerously divided between haves and have-nots, it becomes easier for those with resources and privilege to forget that belonging is often a basic requirement for survival.

Are we fostering a sense of belonging in our congregation that honors what is differently at stake for each of us when we gather and create community with one another? When we are not in danger ourselves, are we noticing when events, near or far, may impact others more harmfully because of their identity, language, beliefs or lived experiences? And when we notice, do we avoid assuming we know what that

impact is, instead taking time to simply and compassionately ask, "How are you?" Or when we are experiencing risk or danger ourselves, do we have ways of letting others know? Are we cultivating belonging that helps us all show up and be seen as our true and vulnerable selves?

When we find ourselves at any of the many dangerous intersections of our stormy and troubled times, are we helping one another become more visible by asking, "Can we cross this street together?"

*From Literary Minister Karen Hering on behalf of this month's theme team:  
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### Belonging Theme Resources

#### BOOKS

*Go, Went, Gone*, novel by Jenny Erpenbeck (2017)

*Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* by Amartya Sen (2006)

*The Golden Compass*, novel by Philip Pullman (1996)

*Belonging: Remembering Ourselves Home* by Toko-pa Turner (2017)

#### MOVIES

*Mulan*, 1998 animated movie

*The Point*, 1971 animated movie