

“An Owned Belonging”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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John 17:6-19

Welcome back to the dense thicket we call the Farewell Discourse of John’s gospel, a four-chapter long explanation given by Jesus to the disciples about what’s going to happen next and why. These four chapters, fourteen through seventeen, are bracketed by the Last Supper in chapter thirteen, and Jesus’ betrayal and arrest in chapter eighteen. In between, the prose is thick, laden with heavy meaning and full of fine distinctions. It’s hard reading, especially the very last part, when Jesus stops talking to his disciples and starts praying to God.

The portion of the prayer we just heard basically asks God to protect the disciples during Jesus’ upcoming absence. Jesus offers two reasons why God should do this. First, the disciples will need God’s protection, because they will be in danger. The same hatred the world has for Jesus it will also have for his disciples. Second, and more importantly, the disciples belong to God, and this belonging somehow entitles them to protection.

That sense of belonging, however, is not expressed in terms of connection, as in, “I belong to this group or that group,” where we state our claim to being part of a community. Instead, Jesus continually refers to the disciples as belonging to God in the sense of possession, as in, “That purse or this car belongs to me.” Listen to the words of Jesus. “They were yours, and you gave them to me.” “All mine are yours, and yours are mine.” In other words, Jesus pleads for God to protect the disciples because God owns them, and just as you would take care to lock your car or hold on more tightly to your purse in a rough neighborhood, Jesus is asking God to defend the disciples during the tumultuous times ahead.

We like the idea of God protecting us. We are less sure how much we like the notion that God owns us. When we speak of belonging to God, we prefer to think of that in terms of, “we’re with him,” not “we are his.” But truth be told, God does own us – lock, stock, and barrel – because God made us and God redeemed us.

In an ownership society, we ought to be somewhat comfortable with this sense of belonging, but since we’re the ones accustomed to doing the owning, it’s a little disturbing to think that in our relationship with God, He owns us. We understand the implications all too well. When we take ownership of a house, for instance, we can do whatever we want with it, more or less. Want to paint every room a different color? Grab a bucket and a brush and have at it. Want to add a room? Get a building permit (good luck), a trustworthy contractor, and knock yourself out. What we find uncomfortable is that as we do with a house, God may do with us, which is to say, pretty much as He pleases.

That way of belonging to God, being owned by him, bothers us because we prefer to do pretty much as we please. We value our freedom, particularly on this Memorial Day weekend as we are made more aware of the awesome yet awful price that has been repeatedly paid to secure our freedoms. Yet our civil liberties mean less when we choose to ignore or resist the simple truth that we belong to God, not only in the sense that God invites us to become part of a special community bound up in Him, but also in the sense that God owns us as a belonging by right of the sacrifices He has made. Our consent in this arrangement is merely to acknowledge God’s right of ownership. To deny consent is to set off a property dispute over our very souls.

What does it mean to belong to God? Does it mean that we must be resigned to live a life that has been pre-determined, programmed if you will by God from before the beginning of time to play out in a certain pattern? No. It’s quite obvious to all but the most doctrinaire that we are

able to make choices to obey or sin, to love or hate. But belonging to God means that our choices have consequences, and that our choices are limited to a certain degree.

There are expectations God has of us. Just as we expect our car to get us from point A to point B, and we can get terribly upset if that expectation isn't met, so also God expects us as his possessions to fulfill the purposes for which we have been made. To put it simply, God expects us to be our best selves, according to God's design, much in the way a house is being itself when it shelter us from rain.

What is our purpose, as fully-owned creatures of our Creator? Well, our individual purposes may vary in the specifics, but overall, when we are sent into the world, we are meant to go, and while we are there, we are to remember who owns us – God, not the world – and show how we belong to God in everything that we do.

That means we are to love, as Jesus did, not counting the cost, but taking joy in the sacrifice love often demands from us, knowing how such sacrifice makes the world a little holier, just as each candle lit brings a little more light into a dark room.

That means we are to share, as Jesus did, the wondrous good news of God's love for us, a love so great we can hardly imagine the smallest shred of it. We may have affection for our possessions, often too much, but at the end of the day, if a Level 5 hurricane is coming, few of us would stick around to try and hold the walls of our house up. But God, through Jesus, did just that, plunging into the thick of a storm to rescue what was His, namely us, saving us from destruction by protecting us, just as Jesus asked.

Again, the particulars may vary when it comes to how each of us goes out into the world to love and share the good news, which are veritably one and the same, but those core purposes must shine through whatever we do if we are to live up to what God wants from us. The good

news for us, as possessions of God, is that God is the most attentive, careful owner the world has ever known. God protects us, repairs us when we break down, sustains and maintains us. God keeps us connected to the grid of grace, the juice always flowing, so that we can fulfill our purpose on Earth with joy and gladness.

The only question left for us to answer is, “Will we own up to the facts, or will we deny that we belong to God?” In the answer to that question lay the difference between life or death, misery or peace. We know what we want. Sometimes, we know what we need, and we usually can see the truth. Are we too proud to admit that God owns us, or are we humble enough to accept that reality with gratitude as the most boast-worthy claim there ever was?

Answer each day. Go out into the world without belonging to it. Love and proclaim the good news, and revel in the happiness of being owned by the Maker of all things who sees each of us as too valuable, too precious a possession to let go of, so He always holds us tight, even to the end. Amen.