

## “A Church Where People Belong”

January 31, 2010

Rev. Thom Larson

In the spring of 1988, our third son came to be part of our family. Some of you may not be aware of the fact that Cindy and I have a third son. His name is Jeremy Jackman. He is almost thirty-one years old and he lives in Idaho Falls.

We first became aware of Jeremy because he was featured on our local television news station as a young man in need of a home. At the time he was a student at the school for deaf and blind children in Gooding, Idaho. We had heard many other stories about children in need of a home that didn't capture our attention. But it just so happened that the custodian of the church where I was serving at the time, had a daughter who was also a student at the school in Gooding. And the next day, I asked Rita if she happened to see the Wednesday's Child segment on the news the night before, and if she knew Jeremy. “Yes,” she said, “I know Jeremy and I saw the segment. He's the sweetest boy. And I think that you and Cindy and Andy and Levi would be the perfect family for him to call home.”

I will never know what prompted her to say that last sentence. At that moment, making Jeremy part of our family was the last thing on my mind. But when I went home that evening and told Cindy what Rita had said, Cindy said, “All day long, I haven’t been able to get Jeremy off my mind. Let’s pray about this for a while and make some inquiries and see where it leads.”

The next six months we were busy meeting with social workers and lawyers and other concerned parties working out the myriad details that have to be completed before a family is certified as a foster care or adoptive home. We chose not to say very much to Andy who was six and Levi who was three because we didn’t want them to be disappointed if for some reason we failed to qualify. But we moved smoothly through the process and the day finally came when we had received approval and were invited to go to Jeremy’s school to meet him.

We weren’t sure how the boys would respond to Jeremy upon meeting him. They had not been around people in wheelchairs very much. They had never known a person who was blind. Jeremy’s mental faculties are different and we weren’t sure what kind of interactions would occur between the boys. So our final decision about taking Jeremy into

our family depended on how Andy and Levi would respond and relate to him.

We went to Jeremy's school. We followed him through most of a typical day. We saw how he was assisted in his eating, in his toileting, in almost everything that needed to be done. We talked with him. We played simple games with him. We just kind of hung out with him.

On the way home after the visit, Cindy and I finally felt the time had come to ask the boys how they would feel if we had Jeremy come to be part of our family. "Will I still be the oldest?" Andy asked. And we assured him that even though Jeremy had been born before Andy, that he would retain the position of being our oldest son because he would be the one who had lived with us the longest. "What happened to his family?" Levi asked. We said we didn't know. All we knew was that Jeremy lived in the nursing home next to the school and that he didn't see anyone from his family. "Well," said our three-year old son, wise beyond his years, "everyone has to have a family. And if Jeremy doesn't have one, then he can belong to ours."

Even a three year old child understands our fundamental human need to belong to a community

of people where we are loved, and valued, and offered care. And there is nothing surprising, or radical, or intellectually challenging about the statement that the church is a place where people belong. Of course it is. We want to be welcoming. We want people to come and be part of our church family. We know that we fulfill God's purpose for us when we love God and love our neighbor. We know that living that love fulfills all the law and leads to eternal life. We know it. It's simple. It's obvious. Just like it was obvious to that expert in the law who one day asked Jesus what he needed to do to receive the gift of eternal life.

The difficulty isn't in the knowing ... it's in the doing. And in our failure to love both God and neighbor we begin to look for excuses, to look for reasons why we are justified in withholding our love, in not creating and enhancing those bonds of belonging. That's what prompted the lawyer's follow-up question to Jesus – “And just who is it that is my neighbor?”

In *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible*, Michael E. Williams updates the parable of the Good Samaritan using people and environments that are more contemporary to us. I invite you to hear the parable once again.

*A religious scholar came to a rabbi one day and asked, “What must I do to find favor with God?”*

*“You’re the scholar,” the rabbi replied. “What do you read in the scripture?”*

*“Love God and your neighbor would be a pretty good summary,” the religious scholar responded with confidence.*”

*“You’re right,” the rabbi told him. “Do your best to do those two things.”*

*“But there’s something I’ve never been quite clear on,” the scholar continued. “Who exactly is my neighbor?”*

*The rabbi replied with this story.*

*Once a traveling evangelist was going from Charlotte, North Carolina, to the Holy Land. He had traveled there many times before and so approached the trip with little hesitation. He had traveled there first with his father, who had also crossed the world bring the word of God to poor benighted humanity. The son had been invited back to speak there because of some comments he had made that were quoted in the Jerusalem Post. For years, the young evangelist had been on a crusade to convert the Jews, believing that these conversions would hasten the second coming of Jesus. This meant that he had not always been welcomed by Jewish communities in his home country or in Israel.*

*“The Jews and the Christians worship the same God, though we have very different ways of worshiping him,” read the quote. “But the God of Islam is NOT the same God as the one we worship. In fact, the God of the Muslims is a god of hatred and vengeance, of homicide bombers who murder innocent children.”*

*Now he was on his way. He had stopped off for a preaching engagement in Chicago and was walking back to the rental car he would drop off at O’Hare. From an alley emerged three shady characters who began to follow him. He could hear them say, “I wish I had a really nice suit like that. I bet I could get a job if I had a really nice suit like that.”*

*In truth the suit had been tailored just for the evangelist and had cost a pretty penny. Suddenly one of the shady characters hit the evangelist on the back of the head with a handgun. The three dragged into the opening of the alley, striped off his tailor-made suit, and with it got the thousands of dollars in cash he had meant to exchange for traveler’s checks when he had the time.*

*There in the alley he was left, bleeding and naked. The pastor of the church where he had preached that morning passed by and saw a naked body lying in the alley, but could not see the body’s face. Bemoaning the effect that drugs and alcohol had on the lives of*

*street people he resolved to write a column about it in the church newsletter the very next week.*

*A member of that same congregation passed by, quickening her steps and hiding her children's eyes from the man's nakedness. "Well, I never," she proclaimed, and the truth is, she hadn't.*

*Then, along came an intern at Cook County General Hospital, from Baghdad, a Muslim. He was just coming off three straight days on call and was dying to get home to his apartment so he could finally get some sleep. When he saw the man, though, he went to him, covered him with his own coat, stopped the bleeding, and called the ER he had just left to come and get the man. The intern rode with him to the hospital, saw that he received the attention he needed, and arranged for the man to stay in the hospital until he was well.*

*"Now I ask you," the rabbi said to the religious scholar," who was a neighbor to the evangelist who was robbed?"*

*"The one who helped him, I suppose."*

*"Then follow his example." There was just a hint of a smile on the rabbi's face as he turned away.*

Every person who is in need is our neighbor.  
Every person who has some place of brokenness,  
some situation of uncertainty, some cause for anxiety

is deserving of our care and must be welcomed as one who belongs in our community.

We know it ... we know it. And yet, it is so difficult to do. There are divisions among us. We don't know how to reach across barriers of class, and race, and generation. We can't agree on issues related to doctrine and faith, let alone politics, or even about what is the appropriate way to worship. We argue with each other ... we complain about each other ... we are suspicious about each other's motives, even to the point where some finally decide that they just don't belong. And the needs that people bring are just so many. And we don't have the resources to address them all. So what are we going to do? How are we going to fulfill God's expectations that we will be a church of compassionate love where all are welcome and all belong?

In his book, Becoming a Blessed Church, Graham Standish suggests that the source of unity and compassionate care that develops within a congregation comes to that church as a gift of the Holy Spirit. He says that there isn't anything more important for a church to do than to pray for that gift of unity and compassion. In the act of praying and asking for the gift, we allow ourselves to put our

individual egos aside, acknowledging that having things the way we want them to be is secondary to the way that God's wants them to be. He quotes Eberhard Arnold, founder of the Bruderhof Movement – a community of Christians in Germany who opposed the evils of the Nazi movement and later emigrated to North America to escape Nazi oppression, who said:

*Only if we have willing, sincere, and open hearts will we find unanimity in our convictions. We have never found it disturbing when people have come to us representing convictions that differ from ours. On the contrary, that is more fruitful than if we had no chance to hear opposing ideas. We believe that a free exchange of ideas can help people to recognize the truth, thanks to a Spirit that does not originate with us human beings. Then, no matter how diverse our opinions may have been, through the ultimate truth we will all be united ... A united conviction can never be produced by forcing anyone to comply. Only the Holy Spirit by the power of inner persuasion leads people from freedom of opinions to true unity.”*

We know we are called to be a church where people belong. The challenge isn't in the knowing, it's in the doing. And the doing begins and becomes possible not through any specific course of action

that originates with us, but in the act of prayer, in our seeking of God's wisdom, in the assurance that God is before us, in us, with us, and through us, blessing us and all life around us and empowering us to do what seems most impossible – even creating a community where all God's children, even those of our most bitter enemy, can belong.

Let us pray together. Let us receive together. Let us belong together. Amen.