

January 19/20, 2008
Finding a Place to Belong: Building the Connections
1 John 1:5-7
Rev. Susan Bresser

“Chomolungma” – maybe you’ve never heard it called this before. Chomolungma – at over 29,000 feet, it is the highest point on the earth. Chomolungma is the Tibetan name for Mt Everest, in the Himalayans, the highest point on the earth. On May 29, 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary, of New Zealand, and a Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norgay were the first to summit Mt Everest. The immensity of what Hillary and Norgay did more than 50 yrs ago is nearly impossible to imagine, even for the most seasoned climber. There were no fixed ropes and ladders, no polar fleece, no GPS for guidance. Just two men, tied together, each carrying over 30 lbs of gear, hacking steps in the ice to climb more than 29,000 feet.

Sir Edmund Hillary died last week at the age of 88. I started hearing news stories of Sir Edmund’s death and became fascinated with his story ... probably because I was working and reworking and reworking a sermon.

At first, when Hillary came down from the summit, the people of Nepal did not embrace him, for he was the outsider who had breached their sacred peak. Hillary made sure to say that Norgay, his guide, was the first to summit, reaching the top a few steps before him. There’s one photo of this historic event: a photo of Tenzing Norgay at the peak. Norgay didn’t know how to use the camera, so Hillary asked him to pose for the shot and he would take the picture. Just before he died in 1986, Tenzing Norgay finally told the truth, that Hillary had in fact been first to summit, and Hillary substantiated that. But he was quick to say, “believe me, to mountaineers, who’s first is not important, because we’re a team ... and we reach the top together.”

When I picture what building the connections might look like – that’s the supposed topic of our sermon this evening/morning – I have this wonderful image in my mind of the teamwork it took to climb Mt Everest. Can you imagine? First of all, it involved the desire and the drive and the calling to do something so amazing. It involved trust, accountability, responsibility, risk-taking, encouragement, support, confidence, dependence, presence of mind and spirit and I would like to think that it took a lot of faith.

Do you live that way? Do you belong to that kind of “concept?” Could it be that we are describing the church? Could it be that mountain climbing and faith growing have something in common?

We are in the middle of our sermon series: Finding a Place to Belong. I’m not making soup today ... no, instead I thought we’d climb mountains. Last week Scott made soup. After I heard his sermon for the 3rd time and watched him make 3 different kinds of soup, I leaned over to him and said, “What am **I** supposed to do next week? How can I top soup?”

So, I thought about **that** all week, too, and here’s what I’ve come up with: I don’t ever have to be about topping Scott’s sermons and he never has to be about topping mine ... because we’re a team and we’ve been climbing the mountain together and we invite you to join us for the journey.

The Word of God comes to us from the first Epistle of John: “If we say that we share in life with God and keep on living in the dark, we are lying and not living by the truth. But if we live in the light, as God does, we share in life with each other.”

If we choose to live in the light, as God does, we can share in life with one another. If we choose to trust in the desire and the drive and the calling to build connections, we can share in life with one another. If we choose to commit to being accountable and responsible, and if we commit to offering encouragement and support, and choosing to place our faith on the line, trusting in God’s presence, we can share in life with one another.

Throughout the scriptures – especially the ones we’ve chosen for this series – the durable connection with God through Jesus Christ is emphasized over and over again. It’s the durable covenant, the durable commitment. That’s really what we’ve been talking about in this sermon series. God continues to hold us in community, inviting us and building the connections. God doesn’t break the connections; God builds the connections. God doesn’t break the connections ... we do. Either because we’ve lost the desire, the drive or we just don’t quite trust God’s calling on our lives. Or maybe we just can not commit to living with encouragement and responsibility and accountability anymore because frankly it’s too hard, it’s too much of a risk and we’ve been disappointed and disillusioned.

Welcome to the church. I hope, I do hope, that you don't accuse me of being cynical. The church is made up of messiness. That's the reality. The church is made up of messy human beings, with messy lives and messy issues. The church is made up of people who fall off the mountain. Either because we've simply let go and given up or because someone let go of us. We're all guilty of that. That's our sin ... that's what sin is: breaking our connection to God and God's people. I think it's a sin to not accept the messiness of the church and I think it's a sin to not take on the messiness of our neighbors.

The church is made up of people who fall off the mountain. Now some people get back up and push forward, relying on the power of being tied together with a common goal. Some people walk away, pained and broken and frustrated, not willing to put up with the messiness anymore. But, you know what? God keeps putting the mountain in front of us.

Which I believe is God's way of continually inviting us and welcoming us back into the fold. Here's the mountain, God says. Here's the path, God says. It's rugged. Sometimes it's treacherous. Oftentimes it's slippery. But it's beautiful. It's breath-taking. It's awesome. And here are the people, the mountain climbers, God says. Some of these people will hold you in place. Some of these people are so strong that they can pull you up and walk behind you, encouraging you and supporting you. And some of these folks, they can't hold you up. They're fragile. They're tired. You have to hold them in place. You have to pull them up. Some days will be messier than others, says God, but it's all a part of the journey.

Fortunately, for us, God sent a Savior to live with us in the messiness. Fortunately, for us, Jesus understands about the messiness and comes to us even in our messiness. That's what keeps me going. I belong ... you belong ... regardless of the mess.

Welcome to the church, I say, with joy. Welcome to the church! You belong. You belong to the kingdom. You belong to the covenant. You belong to the community. You belong on the mountain.

I have a little video clip I'm going to show you. It has nothing to do with climbing mountains ... well, maybe in Michael's mind; it has everything to do with climbing mountains. My friend Michael

actually shot this video while visiting his grandmother, Delores. I need to set it up for you but I want to promise you ahead of time that this little piece will be a blessing to you and it will prove to you that the path God has placed us on is a lighted path and it is a witness to us about God's grace and God's amazing gifts.

Okay ... let me tell you about Michael. He's an exceptionally gifted musician. His Grandma Delores taught him how to play the piano, being an accomplished musician herself. Actually I think Delores saw that God had placed a gift in Michael's hands and she took it upon herself to offer support and encouragement.

Michael's grandma lives in a nursing home. She struggles with dementia. Right before Christmas, Michael went to visit his grandma and his dad suggested he take along a keyboard and that way he could play Christmas music for the residents in the nursing home. The video clip you will see is Michael's grandma playing a shortened keyboard with her right hand because she's not quite sure what to do with her left hand. Toward the end of the clip, you will understand what it means to be involved in the building of connections.

SHOW VIDEO CLIP

(Michael records his grandma playing the keyboard. After a bit, Michael pulls up a chair and joins her in playing: she plays the treble [right hand] and he plays the bass [left hand]. A beautiful example of teamwork and love.)

That's **our** Michael (our Director of Creative Ministries) who climbs the mountain with us – all of us – everyday. What really makes his story so wonderful is that the song that Michael and his grandma are playing together is the very first song – an old hymn called *I've Got a Mansion Just Over the Hill Top* – she taught him when he was just a little, little boy.

If we choose to live in the light that God offers, we can share in life with one another. Welcome to the church! Amen.