

# The Comfort and Responsibility of Belonging

November 16, 2025

My daughter started at a new school this fall, and as you might imagine, she was a little anxious. As she walked into a room full of kids she didn't know, you could see the fear on her face: shoulders tight, eyes down, holding on to my dress. And then another child looked up from a pile of blocks and said five words that changed everything: "Do you want to play?"

Nothing spectacular. No theology. No strategy. Just a simple invitation.

You could see her whole body unlock—as if someone had breathed life back into her. She crossed the room, sat down, and started the long, beautiful process of belonging.

It reminded me that belonging is rarely dramatic, but it is always powerful. And in a world as chaotic and fearful as ours, belonging might just be the thing that saves us.

That's why I'm always so excited on New Member Sunday. When we welcome new members into the life of Union Church—new companions in the road-worn, hopeful, justice-seeking, potluck-making, protest-marching, blessing-box-stocking life we share, it isn't just a procedural moment. It's a moment of theological clarity: a reminder that God keeps stubbornly gathering people into communities of belonging, even in times when everything feels scattered.

And our readings today couldn't frame that belonging more clearly.

Isaiah gives us a vision that feels like a long, holy exhale after generations of brutality and chaos: "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth... no more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days... they shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit."

It is a vision of flourishing after devastation. Isaiah is speaking to a people coming home from exile—thin from hunger, traumatized by displacement, uncertain where they fit now. And God says: You belong. Right here. In my dream for the world, you belong.

And then... Luke hits us with the opposite energy entirely. Instead of a new heaven and a new earth, we're looking at an enormous building—gleaming, magnificent, dripping with wealth—and Jesus saying, "Enjoy it while it lasts."

Every stone, he says. Every stone is coming down.

Years ago, I attended a conference on Youth Ministry that was held at a megachurch in Texas. The building was huge, elaborate, and built to impress. During one of our breaks, they offered a tour. The guide kept saying, "Notice the craftsmanship... look at the marble... admire the detail."

But all I could think was: This is trying way too hard. When something is truly stable, it doesn't need to announce itself.

Standing in that building helped me hear today's Gospel a little more clearly. The disciples are gawking at the temple—"Look at the beautiful stones!"—and Jesus basically says, "Don't get attached."

Because real belonging isn't found in buildings that shout for attention. It's found in communities that whisper, "You matter. You're safe. You belong."

Human beings love to build monuments to power, to permanence, to the fantasy that some leader, some empire, some nation is eternal. But Jesus reminds us: these trappings of power are often the most fragile. And sometimes the shine is a distraction from the rot.

Jesus is saying, "Don't be fooled by the big stones. Don't place your trust in the myths of stability that powerful people sell you. Pay attention instead to what is truly eternal."

That's hard. It's much easier to cling to whatever looks solid. It's tempting to be impressed by gold leaf and soaring ceilings rather than to invest in the fragile project of building community.

### **The Hunger to Belong**

And this is where belonging becomes essential—not just comforting, but necessary. And the late poet-priest John O'Donohue says it plainly: "The hunger to belong is at the heart of our nature... When we become isolated, we become vulnerable to fear and negativity... Truth, unity, goodness, justice, beauty, and love—these are the embodiments of true belonging." O'Donohue is right: isolation makes us small and scared. Belonging makes us brave.

Which is why it matters—deeply—that Union has chosen again and again, across generations, to belong not to the myth of power but to the way of Jesus. It's why, when laws were unjust, our spiritual ancestors here at Union Church were part of the Underground Railroad. Not because they were fearless, but because they belonged to something greater than fear. They were connected to a moral tradition that said: Do not obey in advance. Belonging to Christ gave them courage.

And now here we are, in another moment of national upheaval, another season when—let's be honest—chaos and cruelty seem to be having a winning streak. On his blog, "The Son Do Move," Rev. Trey Ferguson puts it bluntly:

"There is an anxiety that accompanies awareness...  
We travel through a world rendered hostile by its inhabitants...  
You will be gaslit. Ceaselessly."

He says that in times like these, we will be tempted to lose hope. But then he adds the line that undoes me every time: "YOU may be the answer to a prayer. You may carry the light that chases the darkness away for someone."

Beloveds: this is why the world needs communities like ours. Not perfect communities. Not always-certain communities. But communities where light is shared so it doesn't go out.

## **Belonging = Comfort + Responsibility**

When I say “belonging,” I don’t mean a membership certificate (I did away with those a few years back – I mean, what did we expect people to do with those? Hang them on their walls?). No, when I say “belonging,” I mean a shared commitment to live awake in a world that tries constantly to lull us into numbness, despair, or distraction.

You don’t have to do everything. You don’t have to fix the world alone. But belonging helps you discover what is yours to do, gives you companions to do it with, and also gives you permission to lay down what is not yours.

- Some of you belong to Union because you crave beauty.
- Some of you belong because you crave justice.
- Some of you belong because you need a place where your kids can ask actual questions about God.
- Some of you belong because life has handed you grief, and you cannot carry it alone.
- Some of you belong because the world feels like Luke 21 these days—chaotic, loud, full of injustice and fear—and you need Isaiah 65 whispered back into your bones.

Whatever brought you here: you belong.

## **A Chance to Witness**

So what do we do with Jesus’ words in Luke? What do we do when the big stones start shaking? What do we do when institutions we thought were solid turn out to be sandcastles? What do we do when the people who should protect the vulnerable double down on rhetoric and policies that harm them?

Jesus says something strange: Don’t prepare your defense. Don’t script your speech. You’ll be given the words you need.

He’s not telling us to be passive. He’s telling us to trust that the Spirit shows up in the moment, not in the illusion of control. Our call is not triumph but endurance. Not polish but presence. Not certainty but courage.

And this is where belonging saves us. Because when we belong to one another, we can endure things we never could alone.

To fuel that endurance, our passage from Isaiah reminds us that every once in a while, life gives you a moment where your whole body breathes out—finally—after holding tension you didn’t even know you were carrying. Maybe it’s the doctor saying the scan is clear. Maybe it’s the text that says, “I’m home.” Maybe it’s just waking up after a long season of grief and realizing your heart feels a little less heavy that morning.

Isaiah 65 is one long exhale like that. A whole people releasing generations of fear and violence and displacement. God saying, “Rest now. Heal. Grow again.” Beloveds: You may be the answer to a prayer.

God is putting the world back together through relationships. Through justice. Through hope that stubbornly refuses to die. Through our church, where belonging is both a comfort and a calling.

So today, as we welcome new people into this beautiful, imperfect family: May we remember who we are. May we remember to whom we belong. May we remember that every act of love is a stone in the building of God's new world.

May we keep walking toward that world—together. Amen.

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**Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19**  
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