

**Series: BELONG...BELIEVE...BECOME! January 7, 2007**

**CONNECTING  
Acts 2:42-47**

**I. INTRO**

- A. Some of you probably remember Coke's big push back in the 70's—**New Coke!** They were consistently flunking taste tests when compared to their main competitor—Pepsi. So they spent millions of dollars in research coming up with a better taste. Well, as you know, New Coke flew like a pewter kite, and Coke yanked it off the market immediately. What they realized in retrospect was that the **main thing** for Coke was not taste, it was **tradition**. Anyone know what they've called their product ever since? **Coca-Cola Classic!**
1. Whenever people forget what the **main thing** is in any area, they get in trouble. Let's do a test to see how you're doing on this:
    - \*The **main thing** for a car is...
      - a) impress your friends
      - b) a cool driving experience
      - c) transportation from point **A** to point **B**
    - \*The **main thing** for a family is...
      - a) to jam in as many activities as possible
      - b) a place to dump all the frustration you collect in any given day
      - c) to please the grandparents and impress friends
      - d) to provide a safe, sane, healthy place for people to develop and learn how to love each other
    - \*The **main thing** for a house is...
      - a) to be a money pit
      - b) to be a show piece that would impress Martha Stewart, should she come to visit
      - c) to be a safe, comfortable environment to live in
 That's great! You folks have life all nailed down!
  2. Sometimes we forget what the **Church** is all about. Some see it as a place to **hatch, match** and **dispatch**. The church exists for **God's** pleasure, for **God's** glory—to do **God's** will. To fulfill Jesus' mission on this planet. In other words, our main thing is **people**. We are called to love people, accept people, serve people—and have a part in the transformation of their lives. And **we** are transformed as we do that. Our main thing is **people!**
    - The problem with that is that it's unpredictable. Handling people's souls, loving them, walking with them, accepting them, helping them heal up from past hurts, challenging them to become generous, loving, forgiving, changing, God-loving, purity loving people is way, **way** different—and way, **way** more complicated than manufacturing widgets and building a business.
- B. But our mission as a church is, with God's power behind us, to see this happen—not complain about how complicated and tough it is. Our mission, I believe, is to build great people for the glory of God—and **become** great people in the process.
- And that's what we're going to be talking about all this month. This month is your official invitation from me, from the leaders of this church to engage. To be partners with us. To give yourself fully to the mission of Jesus here in Markham and, I believe, the entire GTA.

-When we're done—my prayer is that those of you who initially committed yourself to this mission will find renewed energy and passion and vision—that our mission will be clearer than ever. My prayer for those of you who have recently come is that you will fully engage. And for those of you who are kicking the tires—that you will kick the tires harder!

-And I'll tell you what the biggest barrier is. Inertia. We are by nature consumers. We start as little consumers—sucking, depending, being carried, nurtured, changed, sung to. And that's a really **good** thing. But there eventually comes a time when we learn to dress ourselves, feed ourselves, bathe ourselves—eventually buy our own food and cook it—and become a productive member of a community. It's called...**growing up!** And it can be tough—but it's what everyone wants as a healthy person.

-At The Olive Branch, we want **everyone** to be actively engaged in the process of growth!

## II. THE MAIN THING

A. The question I want to start with is this: What is the first thing people need to sense or feel that makes them want to move toward God? That's crystal clear. Love. The only reason we would **ever** come close to Being as awesome and powerful and pure as God is if we knew that He loved us—just as we are.

-And that's what Jesus did. He started his ministry by making friends with people—before they got their act together or even believed in him. Most eventually did believe; one, Judas, **never** did.

1. If you look at how Jesus worked, you find that there was a larger group of at least 72, a smaller group of 12 that he spent most of his time with. And then there was an inner core of 3—Peter—the leader, and James and John, Jesus' cousins.

-Jesus connected with one of the deepest needs in the human soul—a need every single person on the face of this planet has; the need to **belong**. The need to have a group of people who know you, accept you, value you, notice if you're not around—who really, **really** care about you. Friends, I'm telling you—**everyone** has this need. I do, and you do. That's how God made us. We were made to belong to God and belong to others. God can't and won't fill our need to belong to others; and others can't and won't fill our need to belong to God.

-Please hear this, burn it into your mind and heart: These people around Jesus were his friends—they **belonged** before they could believe. And the sense of belonging was created by love. Acceptance. Care. Value. Meaning.

2. I've noted a few things about this group—and what it meant to belong.

a. First, you need to know that the people in this group were vastly different. For example, it included Matthew, a tax collector—who *cooperated* with the Romans and Simon the freedom fighter whose slogan was, "the only good Roman is a dead Roman!" I'll bet **they** had some interesting conversations! It has people who had lived in poverty—and people who had lived in luxury. Men and women. Rule-keepers—and people with scandalous pasts.

b. They sometimes got angry with and jealous of each other and had to work things out. They saw the seamy, unflattering side of each other—I mean, **they** could tell a few stories out of class! But that didn't stop them from belonging to each other and loving each other.

c. They did life **together**. They ate together, traveled together, slept under the stars together—they spent a **lot** of time together

- d. In tough times, they would initially scatter, but always seemed to find a way to get back **together** again
  - e. And, **together**, in the power of the Holy Spirit, they turned their city—and eventually the world of that day—upside down. **Together** has **incredible** power!
3. With his teaching, with his life—with everything He did, Jesus showed what it meant to belong to the Father, and what it meant to belong to each other. And that was His plan. By grace, by love, by sacrificing his life—to connect people to God and connect them to each other.
- a. And Jesus made it clear what the Father is most interested in seeing in our lives. Love. Love for God—that gets translated into loving others. Jesus taught that if our love for God never gets translated over into offering love, warmth and acceptance to those around us, well, we've missed the main thing. And we don't really love God, either.
  - b. And that's how Jesus lived. He infuriated the religious professionals by offering his love and acceptance to everyone. Lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, Roman soldiers—people broken by addiction and sin and disease were **irresistibly** drawn to him. Funny, the people who **weren't** drawn to him were the religious people.  
-And Jesus said that **love**--not rules, knowledge, or religion—is the **dead give-away** that God is close. Love sees others as the treasure of God—no matter how far they've strayed, or how out-of-reach they appear to be.
  - c. Jesus' life was **saturated** with love. You see it in him treating people like God's treasure--stripped to his underwear, washing feet; healing broken people; giving and giving unselfishly of himself. And we see it in how he treated his 12 friends. Love, for Jesus, was a two-way street. He trusted his friends; depended on them—asked them to walk with him and pray for him in his deepest valley.
  - d. But most of all—and, friends, we need to **learn** from this—He **made time for them**. Think about it. He has limited time—only 3 years--as the Savior of the world to get his message out. And he spent most of it with these people. He was never in a hurry; never too busy to talk, to listen, to explain his teaching, or to show love.
4. So, let me be really clear on this. God has chosen—first through Jesus, then through us, to appeal to the deepest need people have. The need to be loved and accepted, to be valued as God's treasure—the need to **belong**. When we treat people like that, it makes sense when we talk about God's love. If people who have God's Spirit in them won't love and accept and value people **just as they are**, it makes no sense to talk about a God who loves and treasures them.
- B. Right before He ascended to the Father, Jesus met with this group of close friends and basically told them to go through the world and **disciple** or build spiritual friendships with others—then baptize them and show them the way of life he'd lived before them. And they apparently knew exactly what he was telling them to do. And so, they did. After waiting for the same **Power** Jesus had—the Holy Spirit—Peter gave the message of Jesus. And then they gathered those first 3000 who responded into little loving communities like the one they had experienced with Jesus. Listen to the record:  
**All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and**

wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47 NLT).

1. Now, was there teaching? Of course there was. They were **devoted** to it. But notice that it's not the central part of what was going on. The central part is something called **fellowship**. You see that played out here in this passage. It's doing life together as close friends!
  - You see the big gathering part of this—the teaching of the apostles and gathering at the temple for worship. But the small group, **house** part of this is the glue that holds them all together. Being in each other's homes. Praying together. Eating meals together. At The Olive Branch we call these little groups **Roots** groups. Can anyone guess why?
2. This passage says that they learned, prayed and shared meals together—and their gatherings were characterized by joy and gratitude and power—and unbelievable selflessness. These early gatherings were so controversial that a guy named Saul initially devoted his life to exterminating them. But the nastier and more bloodthirsty he got—the more these gatherings grew.
  - Why? Well, at the core they offered a supernatural belonging. Belonging to God and belonging to others. See, everyone dreams of really being known by others who won't reject you when they find out how weird and quirky and filled with flaws you are; of having people around you who will lay down their lives for you.
3. Now, this is why I'm really trying to say. I want **you—ALL of you**—to have that incredible feeling of **belonging**. To feel that you're valuable, that people know you—warts and all—and love you as God's treasure. That when life gets really tough, you will have a wall of people watching your back, standing behind you. That when you fall, **no one** will kick you—that all you'll see is hands reaching down to lift you up.
  - That when there are victories in your life—we will be the first to throw a party; and when there are defeats, we will be there to sit quietly with you and mourn. That as you marry—we will celebrate! And as you have kids, they will be **our** kids too—and we will help them be what God wants them to be.
  - That as you bring friends and relatives and neighbors on your arms, they will long to belong to the circle of people who **know** you and **love** you and **serve** you. We want to learn how to be that kind of people!
  - Our prayer is that getting planted in that kind of warm, nurturing soil will bring incredible growth to your life! That we can help you find your wings and soar! That down deep inside, one of your strongest feelings will be, **I BELONG to these people...and I want to do life with them!**
  - That's our dream! But, if that's going to happen, we need you! See, we can't bring a gang to your house who want to know you and love you. You'd think, "These people are **stalking** me!"
  - So, **you** have to engage. It'll be scary at first. And your first try at **Roots** may not be a perfect fit. But our plan is that **everyone** finds a loving community where they can open their hearts. That can happen in a serving team in Kid's Branch, or Branch Out—or a worship team. See, all these teams here spend time **doing**, but also loving each other, praying together. Supporting each other.

-Let me explain a root system. Has anyone ever seen a tree—or anything grow longterm without a root system? The root system of a tree can be bigger than the tree itself. Without roots, there's no water or nutrients or stability. When everything freezes, roots keep the tree alive; when there's been no rain for 2 months, roots keep the tree watered. When the winds blowing at 80 kph., the roots keep the tree upright.

-That's what we want **Roots**—our small group ministry—to do for you. For you to have a little loving community around you that helps keep you nourished and standing up through the stuff that just happens in life. But for **Roots** to do you any good at all, you have to be connected; you have to be open to the love and input of others; you have to let them hold you—and you have to hold them, build into them, help them.

4. The plan for **Roots** is for this to be a place where you build strong friendships, grow—but mostly—**belong**. Look at this root system. How many of you think it's the most gorgeous thing you've ever seen? It's not. It's a little gnarly, dirty, pretty tangled up—no apples or peaches growing—no leaves. **Roots** is not about being slicked up; about pretending to be someone you're not. It's about getting into the dirt of everyday living and allowing your life to get intertwined around others. It's not the place where you show off—it's the place where you're **real**.

-But it's the place where you can give of yourself in ways that other's lives.

Anyone have any idea what you'll have to give up to receive this gift of friendship and belonging? It's what we in the GTA consider our most valuable possession. Time. And image. Friends, this is not extraneous, "if-I'm-not-busy" stuff. Imagine if a tree said, "I'm too busy to put down roots. Later, Dude!" It takes time.

-So, will you do it? Something else. There are a **lot** of you who could, with our help and support, **lead** or **host** a community where **Roots** go deep. It's not brain surgery; it's simply helping people be good friends. How many of you think you could do something like this—if you had someone else who would partner and do it with you?

- C. Let me summarize. Jesus said that love is the most important thing, both for now and eternity. He said that **love** sums up everything God wants us to accomplish with our lives. Love Him with everything; love others like we love ourselves. Jesus, God's Son showed up as an expression of God's love. He said, "I didn't come to judge and condemn the world; I came to **save** it." Paul called it a ministry of reconciliation—making friends with people who desperately needed God as their friend. And now that's **our** job as friends of God. What we're supposed to do is very clear; help people belong to God and belong to each other.

-People need a safe community for that to happen. And that's why our vision is to be a safe community where undecided people can make a great decision about becoming great friends with God through Jesus. Jesus was criticized because he accepted people into his inner circle who didn't talk right, sound right or live right until they had enough evidence to **believe**. For us to live out Jesus' mission, we will have to do the same--**actively accept people and help them belong to us—and then to God**. That's our vision.

-Friends, ***we can do that! We can help people belong to us...and help them believe that they also belong to God because they've been paid for in advance!*** But we **all** need to engage. So, are you in? Let's talk about **how**.

### III. YOU ARE THE 'H' CONNECTION!

- A. Recently in our house, we made a technological breakthrough on internet stuff. For us, anyway. We started with dial-up—you know, all the weird noises, tying up the phone system. Then we got DSL—highspeed! Wow. What a difference. Most recently, we went wireless. We got a wireless “G” router. By the way, what the heck is the difference between a “G” and an “N” router?
1. Well, truth is, we’ve been fighting with the thing ever since. See, sometimes *none* of us can even get *on* the internet! Pat Ireson, my personal computer guru, says that someone else in our neighborhood is piggy-backing; i.e., using *our* signal to get themselves a free wireless connection! So, if someone here is doing that, **CUT IT OUT!**  
-Now, you know that whether it’s a DSL connector or a wireless connector—or a cable connector—this stuff isn’t the **internet**. It just helps you **connect** to it. It’s what makes all these invisible waves and signals suddenly come into focus—in color—and let you interact; send email, do IM, banking, order gifts, put your trip to Mexico on **YouTube**. It’s **just** the connection. But if there **is** no connection—there’s no access. At all.
  2. I want to talk about connecting for a few minutes. A number of the leaders from The Olive Branch were at a Leadership Training event last summer, and we were asked to describe, with one word, what simply **had** to happen for our church to move ahead in the next year to where God was calling us. The word we chose was—**CONNECT!** We thought, “We need **EVERYONE** to be able to connect—whether it’s kids to Kid’s Branch; youth with Playing With Fire; people to **Roots**. Somehow, we need to light up the pathways so everyone knows how to **connect, belong, build friendships, find their gifts, engage in their calling, sense, THIS IS HOME! I BELONG HERE!**”
    - a. So, how’s this going to happen? Well, part of it is leadership, administration and communication. We need to over communicate that stuff until everyone knows how to get from the edges of this community to the center of it. No one should **ever** feel like they’re on the outside, looking through a plate glass window. So, we need your help. If something is obscure--**tell us!** And we’ll do better. I promise.
    - b. Let me just say a word about what makes up the core of this place. It’s **Ministry Partners**. When we started the church three years ago, we were **very** clear that we didn’t want **members**—like this was some kind of club. We wanted people who would partner with us in every way. We wanted people to be following Jesus, pursuing personal growth, to be connected with close, accountable friendships, using their gifts, helping with their resources—and included in **all** the action.  
-And if you are solidly on board with what God is doing here—and you want to be an active part of it—then become a Ministry Partner! You can ask at the **Mission Control** desk for help on that.
  3. But it’s more than that. For us to be a warm, accepting, caring community that truly connects with people’s desire to **belong**—it will take **all** of us. Did you hear me on that? For us to be a community where people feel that they **belong** it will take **ALL OF US!**  
-Let me make a statement and see if you can agree. Toronto—the GTA can be a pretty cold place, and I’m not talking about the weather. If you walk down the street, the people coming the other way will not generally look you in the eye and

smile or acknowledge that you're a human being. In fact, my experience is that people generally find the sidewalk **very** fascinating about them. I'm not sure **why** it's this way—but it is. Think about it for a minute. What would **Jesus** do if He was in Toronto? How many of you think he'd just look at the sidewalk and walk right by people and treat people with souls like they're part of the landscape? What would Jesus be like in a room? In a corner, arms crossed, daring people to be friendly or lock eyes? Or run for all of his really **cool** friends?

-Now, cold/disinterested may be the way **Toronto** is—but it's **not** the way Jesus is. And that's not acceptable behavior for people who call themselves the community of Jesus. And it is **totally unacceptable** that anyone would ever walk into a gathering that carries Jesus' Name, and feel that no one cares or notices. So, we'll have to buck the status quo on this.

-Being like Jesus means cultivating warmth; openness, acceptance. Why? Because people—**all of them**—deeply matter to God. He longs to be connected with them. He wants them to know that they **already** belong to Him—because they've been paid for with blood, and they will never be rejected, shamed, or turned away. He's passed on to us the ministry of reconciliation—or spiritual friendship. So, that's now our job as His people. This is a 'G' router. We are the 'H' router. The **human** connection. See, when God wants something done, he always sends a flesh and blood, frail, person to do it—and pours His love through them—through **us!**

-That's a trait that we have intentionally tried to imbed deeply into the culture here at The Olive Branch. We spend time drinking coffee and eating snacks here—**not** because we need more caffeine and sugar, but because holding a cup of something helps us open up. Read about Jesus—and he spent a **lot** of time eating and drinking with people. The New Testament says, "Greet each other with a holy kiss." We don't do a lot of that—but we do hug. Now, some people don't like that—and we have to be respectful. My point is that the **warmth factor is HUGE** if we are going to be a safe place for people to **belong**, to build friendships that last a lifetime.

4. How can we be people like that? Well, we have to get very serious about the stuff that attacks the glue—the peace of Jesus—that holds us together. Anything that attacks love here, we will treat as disease: Unfriendliness. Greed. Self-serving networking. Unresolved hurt and unforgiveness. Jealousy. Pride. We get **very** serious about that here.

-And anything that attacks the purity of the life of the life and love Jesus offers is disease: Lust. Predatory behavior. Joyless, negative, critical attitudes. Image management. Exclusiveness. Legalism. The twisting of biblical truth.

-And anything that attacks the peace of this community is the enemy. We are **very** serious about going after slander, backbiting, gossip, unkindness, divisiveness, racism and arrogance. All this stuff makes churches **unsafe**—and we are committed to being **safe**. And that means preserving the unity the Spirit of God brings between people. If we have a problem with someone, we go **directly** to them and talk to them—with the goal of resolving and preserving the relationship. None of this behind the scenes stuff!

5. If you want, in your heart, to **belong**--to be known, loved, accepted, served, celebrated—you can't just sit back and wait for someone to **do** that to you. Belonging is always mutual.

-Let me explain it like this. Any of you ever done any gluing? Some things are **easy** to glue—like two pieces of papers. Others are more difficult to glue. Anyone here ever tried to glue two pieces of glass together—or two pieces of stainless steel? It's **very** tough. See, the surface of what you are gluing is very important. Part of what makes a good bond between two things is whether or not the surface is **porous**; i.e., has holes in it or a roughness to it. **Both** surfaces need to be porous.

- a. My life has holes in it. Defects in the surface. Uncompleted spots. Vulnerable spots. Hopefully I've been open enough with you so that you **know** that. Does that make me vulnerable and open to getting hurt and criticized? Of course. But it **also** opens up the possibility for what I want most. Close relationships that **stick** and don't let go! Please don't mistake what I'm saying here. I haven't arrived. I'm **working** on this.
- b. Part of the deal in a big city like Toronto is that people don't want others to **know** that they've got holes; rough spots; imperfections; vulnerable places; scars. Anyone know what happens? **Image management**. It's like we spray coat after coat after coat of polyurethane over the surface, or try to coat it with glass or stainless steel so it seems hard, perfect and impenetrable. And what we do is effectively seal off our lives from close, bonding relationships.  
-Does it look cool? Impressive. Yep. And it keeps people at a distance. **Everyone** wants to belong—to have relationships that stick for a lifetime. To have it, we have to be willing to expose the imperfect side to our lives.
- c. There also has to be warmth. Did you ever notice that it's hard to glue an ice cube to something? The instructions on glue almost always say that it only works at room temperature—or not far below it. Your chances of building relationships that last—**belonging**—go up dramatically if you you're a warm and inviting person!

- B. You would not **believe** the redemptive potential of friendship. Offering warmth and acceptance and belonging to others. In fact, the grace of God tends to travel best along the lines of friendship. Out of curiosity, how many of you came to Jesus—or came to the church because of a friend or relative. In any given gathering, the average is **75 – 90%**.  
-People, for the most part, have to sense that you accept and love them before they'll believe that God accepts them and loves them. I firmly believe that if you are a follower of Jesus, you are **where** you at work, in your neighborhood, or in cubicle land or at school for a very specific purpose. I don't for a second believe that my relational world—or **your** relational world is an accident.
  1. At The Olive Branch, we believe that the people we are most likely to help **belong** to God will be our friends, acquaintances and neighbors. Remember the little thing we did earlier—about how **you** ended up here? The New Testament tells the same story. The Good News of God's offer of friendship through Jesus traveled mainly along relational lines. The Bible called them **households**—which included all the people in someone's relational world.
  2. How many of you would like the help the people in your relational world belong to God? Well, we'll support you in **every way we possibly can!** We'll help you understand your faith in a way you can talk to others about it.  
-When you bring someone on your arm, we will do our very best to provide the kind of context where they will feel the care, the tenderness and the warmth of Jesus—and never embarrass you in front of them by doing things here in a

shabby, haphazard way. We won't be slick or professional—but we **will** be totally real and authentic—and offer the truth of Jesus in a way that is clear and meaningful.

-So, do we have a deal? Remember; **you** are the “H” connection! And that extends far outside these walls. In fact our goal is to turn Jesus loose on Mondays all over the GTA and beyond! But that's another message! -My point: People will have to sense that they **belong** with you before they sense that they **belong** here—and ultimately to Jesus.

#### IV. CLOSING

- A. Let me tell you **my** story about belonging. Just because I'm a pastor doesn't mean that I have **always** felt like I belong. That doesn't come with the job, believe me. But I **do** feel that—**way** more strongly than I ever have. I have **roots!**
- The day I got the call from my brother that my Dad had just died, I was getting ready to go to a small group meeting. Of course, I had to make immediate preparations to go to Pittsburgh. One of the small group members called to tell me that our group had commissioned him to drive with me to Pittsburgh—and he was already packed and ready to go! When I went to pick him up, the rest of the group gathered around me and prayed for me and my family.
- This guy came down with me to my Mom's home and simply loved me and my family and served us for two entire days. Getting lunch. Helping us make contacts. All he did was serve. Then as many of the small group who could come—along with several others--drove the whole way to Pittsburgh to be with us at the viewing and for the funeral service. Then he bought a plane ticket and flew back. I just need to tell you what that did for my heart—and for the hearts of every member of our family. We will **never, EVER** forget that!
- And it's contagious. I'm not sure if you know Shawn and Bree Walsh—but they went to visit her family in N. Carolina over Christmas, and she delivered their first baby, Lincoln, 3 months premature, on Christmas Eve. So a member of their small group flew down to be with them—and came home a couple of days ago. This **belonging** stuff is powerful stuff!
- B. Inside your heart, you have a deep need to belong. To belong to God, and to belong to others. And God has made it possible for that need to be met in **profound** ways through His people. And it is our deepest wish and dream for this church that we will **all** feel the beauty and warmth and safety of **belonging!** Will you help us? Are we in this together?