

Emmanuel Presbyterian Church

Sermon and Sanctuary

Summer 2026



This summer's sermon series is one I'm really looking forward to. David explained it as exploring the grace of God - grace that starts at the edges. Over the next months we will explore biblical figures who were embraced, called, or included before they had made a confession of faith, had a correct theology, or a morally acceptable lifestyle. Jesus radically included those who were rejected by the societal rules that governed both religious and 'polite' society.

Belonging involves being truly seen, with all of our unique traits, strengths, and flaws, and still being recognized as an integral part of the group. We long to belong through the many iterations of ourselves, through the awkward or ugly stages of life, as well as the beautiful and successful stages. True belonging is a rare gift that we give to one another.

Color



When I tried to think of visual ways to explore the theme of 'belonging,' I was reminded of a series of children's books by Todd Parr. Many of Parr's simple board books explore themes of belonging with illustrations that are fun and colorful with the people drawn in bright shades. The text is often simple, "Some Daddies have long hair, some Daddies have no hair, but all Daddies love to watch their babies sleeping."

Inspired by Parr's playful, abstract use of color, I've incorporated the bright colors of stained glass to create the figures in the art around the sanctuary. I wanted to create groups of clearly distinct individual figures who were just as clearly united.

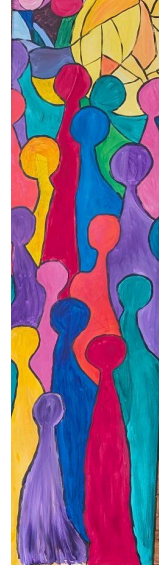
Composition



Artists have a variety of tools available to them. One of those tools is color, another is how the elements of a painting are placed on the canvas. I've placed the figures in the art into groupings that unite them. No one stands alone, they are together dancing, holding hands, or forming a line.

In the center artwork of dancing figures we can see how composition communicates meaning. Often belonging is experienced in terms of a box, we are united with others because we all fit in the same square space. There are clear boundaries that mark who is in and who is out.

I wanted to contrast that version of belonging with that of a circle. In the circle what unites us is the center. From that center figures can move, some close, some a bit more distant, but all journeying around the center. In a circle belonging is not defined by boundaries, but by what unites us.



I've also used lines of people in various ways in the sanctuary. Again, a different compositional choice. The figures in a line are moving forward, together, united in a shared purpose. I found the line of figures communicated the strength in belonging. Having someone walking beside us is both a comfort and a source of strength.

Perspective



In all of the paintings I've removed any sense of realistic perspective. The figures are not grounded in the physical world, there is no horizon line or details that place the figures in a particular time or location.

As we explore the individual stories from the Bible over the next months I wanted the art to take us out of the particulars and encourage us to consider the universal themes these stories illustrate.



Words

Up in the soffits I've created collages that are a combination of images from the front art, and words. During the Renaissance artists occasionally included words in their works, most often in Annunciation paintings. The words are a bit shocking, they draw the eye and attention.

Belonging sounds like a lovely idea, something we all can universally agree is good, but in practical terms it is often difficult, maybe even threatening to practice. Being an authentic community that honors one another is an imperfect, often messy journey.

The words I've included in the soffits are: Safety, community, messiness, resonance, connection, authentic, imperfect, human, becoming, paradox, genuine, and honoring.



Final Thoughts

I'm including a section of a substack article by Anne Bahr Thompson that I discovered while thinking about this topic. Her substack is "Dare to Dream."

"Many of us sense a quiet reckoning underway—a recognition that the culture of othering, of binaries, of purity tests and politicized identities is not sustainable. That beneath performances lies a deeper fatigue. And that somewhere in the tension between solitude and connection, freedom and interdependence, a more pure form of belonging is silently pushing through.

A form that enables people to bravely hold ambiguity.
To belong without conformity.
And to be received in the messiness of their becoming.

In this way, belonging is more than a social construct. It's a spiritual one. It's the foundation of trust, the doorway to creativity, the space where coherence—among belief, behavior, and being—will take root.

We all are seeking spaces where we don't have to audition to belong.
Where we can bring our questions and messiness, alongside our polished identities.
Where we are allowed to hold paradox, to speak imperfectly, to be real.
That is where belief begins.
And in this space is where we can build something more coherent. More human."



Belonging Precedes Belief

