

Advent Lutheran Church  
Inhabiting A More Spacious Christianity  
November 17, 2024  
Psalm 27 (The Message) / John 14:1-14 (NIV)

I remember leading a new member class in another congregation. We were going around the room as each person provided a brief personal introduction. This was working well until one man alerted us that he'd be taking more than his fair share of time because he needed everyone to know his story.

He spent the first sixty or so years of his life trying hard to fit in the narrow confines of the religious tradition of his family of origin. He tried and tried. He dressed the part. He said all of the things they expected him to say. He had near perfect attendance in worship. Despite his best efforts, the longer he remained, the less comfortable he became.

He simply could no longer believe the exact ways they demanded of him. His heart had hardened to their rule-oriented religiosity and he kept going through the motions with less and less enthusiasm.

He wished a version of Christianity existed that would welcome his questions rather than dismiss them, that focused more on God's love than on who was not worthy of love, and where he could bring his full self just as he was rather than needing to pretend to be someone he could never be.

And now this man was discovering that version of Christianity – the one we've been calling a more spacious Christianity. He saw it in his new congregation and needed people to understand why he was so passionate about joining the church – taking the step to formally belong. Or, as he explained it, to affirm what he already knew – this congregation was his spiritual home.

Like this man, we've all been on a journey toward a more spacious Christianity. While your individual story may be longer, our shared story is six weeks young. It is an experience that has

been inspired by a new book: *A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a More Spacious Christianity* by Debie Thomas.

In fact, this morning's modern reading was an excerpt from the book's introduction. *A Faith of Many Rooms* begins with Debie's personal story of never quite fitting in culturally or spiritually. It continues with chapter after chapter exploring how she moves beyond the faith of her family of origin and begins to embrace a more spacious Christianity. And it is an honest reflection about her difficult journey.<sup>1</sup>

I'll come back to Debie's story in a bit. For now, let's consider the idea of belonging. Dr. Brene Brown – a widely recognized author, researcher and storyteller – has written about the difference between fitting in and belonging.<sup>2</sup>

She explains that fitting in is about assessing a given situation and then changing yourself or becoming whoever you need to be to be accepted in a given group. Belonging, on the other hand, is the exact opposite. Belonging doesn't ask us to change who we are, but instead invites us to bring our authentic selves to our relationship with something bigger.

Which brings me back to our faith. We are used to saying I believe or we believe whether reciting the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, or the Athanasian Creed. This is important, but so is recognizing that we belong.

Siblings in Christ let me say this plainly: you belong.

We belong.

We are all God's children.

One of my all-time favorite catechisms comes from our sister denomination – the Presbyterian Church USA. It was written for children, which means it says exactly what needs to be said without using fancy words.

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas. *A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a More Spacious Christianity* (Broadleaf Books, 2024),

<sup>2</sup> Brene Brown. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (2015).

*Belonging to God: A First Catechism* is presented in question-and-answer format.

It begins:

Question 1. Who are you?  
I am a child of God.

Question 2. What does it mean to be a child of God?  
That I belong to God, who loves me.<sup>3</sup>

We belong!

We need to stop trying to fit in.  
And we need to live into our belonging.

Back when I was first starting out in ministry there was a contemporary worship song that brought to life this morning's Gospel reading. If you were young in the 1990s or were around someone who was, you may recall them singing

It's a big big house  
With lots and lots of room  
A big big table  
With lots and lots of food  
A big big yard  
Where we can play football  
A big big house  
It's my Father's house

And you may also remember the song's call to action

Come and go with me  
To my Father's house<sup>4</sup>

As we envision going to God's house, many of us have been taught that God has prepared a place for us in God's house – or if, you prefer, God's mansion – in the life to come. As we

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<sup>3</sup> Available at [www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/catechism1.pdf](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/catechism1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Big House by Audio Adrenaline. Lyrics available at [www.worshiptogether.com/songs/big-house-audio-adrenaline/](http://www.worshiptogether.com/songs/big-house-audio-adrenaline/)

embrace a more spacious and expansive Christianity, we need to acknowledge that while that may be true this part of today's passage is primarily about the here and now.

Rethinking some of our core beliefs is a worthwhile and healthy exercise to engage in from time to time. Thanks to our weekly interactions with content from Debie Thomas' book we've had many opportunities to practice. We've considered lots of tough topics: doubt, sin, story, paradox, and wrestling.

And these only touch on some of her chapters. She also writes about lament, lost, and leaving. And, she ponders women, spirit, and staying.

Whether you heard every sermon in this series or only a few, I hope you have learned specific things about several of these themes, but more importantly I hope that you have learned that Advent Lutheran Church is a safe space for you to explore all of them and more.

You are God's child. You belong to God and God loves you.

You are welcome here at Advent. You can bring your authentic self to worship and to all aspects of congregational life because you are welcome here. We do not want you to fit in, to shape shift, or to become just like the person in a nearby pew. Instead, we need, you to be uniquely yourself so that together we can become the church God intends.

Advent Lutheran Church is more than a church where you are welcome; we are a church where you truly belong.

Amen.