

“To Who Do We Belong”

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Now I beseech you, brothers and sisters,
through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that all of you be in agreement
and that there be no divisions among you, but that you
having been joined together be united in the same mind
and the same purpose (opinion, resolve).

For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people
(those of Chloe’s household) that there are
quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

What I mean is that each of you says,
“I am for Paul,” or “I am for Apollos,”
or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.”

Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you?
Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

I thank God that I baptized none of you
except Crispus and Gaius,
so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name.
(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas;
beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

For Christ did not send so much send me to baptize
but to proclaim the gospel,
and not with eloquent wisdom,
so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

For the word about the cross is foolishness
to those who are perishing (on the road to perdition),
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

“To Whom Do We Belong”

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

January 25, 2026

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(In-person and on-line worship canceled due to cold.)

I.

In this morning’s passage, the Apostle Paul is addressing the church in Corinth, a rather divided and troubled congregation, and poses a rather interesting question, although not in so many words: “To whom do you belong?” Curiously, though, Paul never explicitly answers that question; not really. Instead, Paul leaves it to the listener to infer for themselves their own answer to the very important and fundamental question of belonging. So, this morning, I thought we, as the church at Canton might do some inferring of our own.

Before we get swept away in all that, however, let us first address the theological and ecclesiastical basics behind the passage just in case the orthodoxy police are reviewing our Youtube recordings. Then I am going to tell you about my friend Father Jim Vacco.

II.

In 1923, the Austrian philosopher Martin Buber published his seminal work entitled, I and Thou. I was first introduced to the book while an undergraduate at Bucknell University and it really rattled my cage. Later, at Princeton Seminary, I again crossed paths with the book and it saved my hide as it evicted me from the stark existentialism in which, many years earlier, I had made myself a rather uncomfortable and sparsely furnished home. Quite cleverly and, even, simplistically Buber’s I and Thou pushed me through all the alienation and nihilism that existentialism so freely offered to arrive at philosophy of *relationship* by using the very same tenet of existence over essence that my old friend, Frederick Nietzsche, had so convincingly espoused for me. (*Hang in there with me, this is going somewhere we want to be.*)

III.

Buber's main proposition is that we may address existence in either one of two ways. First, we may have the attitude of an "I" towards an "It," towards an object that is separate in itself and which we either use or experience. In the parlance of today's world this "I-It" relationship would be understood as "transactional" which views all of life a zero sum game where the gains of one are equal to the losses of the other.

However, we also have an alternative choice, and it is a choice: to approach existence with the attitude of the "I" towards what Buber calls the "Thou." An "I-Thou" relationship is one in which the other is not separated by discrete bounds, and the gains of one are directly related and proportional to the gains of the other. For Buber, then, human life finds its meaningfulness in relationships, and all of these relationships bring us ultimately into relationship with God, who is the *Eternal* Thou.

IV.

We are delving into Martin Buber this morning in order to remind ourselves of what we already know, either consciously or unconsciously: that all of existence is experienced *relationally*, and that we have a choice about the manner in which we relate to each other. Either as an "It" or as a "Thou" (to use Buber's terms).

Returning now to the Corinthian congregation, we may understand what was happening there as the "I-It" relationship paradigm run amok. Sit tight, though, because it gets worse. Taken together, that is collectively, all of these individual "I-It" relationships coalesce into what I call the "Us/Them" phenomenon. Which, to me, is the laziest and least effective form of self-understanding. Here we set others as different from ourselves. Meanwhile, we band together with those who are like "Us," while setting ourselves apart from those we decide are *unlike* us. We bifurcate, or split the world into the "Us" with whom we are alike and the "Them" who are unlike (us).

V.

Alas, this is a train that is hard to stop once it has left the station. As soon as we make such an initial distinction between "Us" and "Them," the need for self-understanding morphs into the far less noble quest for constant self-affirmation and, sooner or later, some in the "Us" group get moved over to

the “Them” group. With the criteria for belonging to “Us becoming more and more exclusionary. The bologna keeps getting sliced thinner and thinner until, finally, hardly any substance remains and you can, literally and figuratively, see right through it. Which is how folks in the Corinthian church ended up making claims about belonging to either Apollos, or Paul, or Cephas and Paul sees right through all of it.

Such a practice is not limited to way back when. Oh no, it is occurring all the time in organizations around us every day, churches in particular. Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your *personal* Lord and Savior, are you pro this or pro that, how do you vote, whose lives matter to you? It really isn't very hard to see through, is it?

VI.

Hence, in today's scripture passage, Paul is advocating for a relationship with *God*. To use Buber's language, a relationship with the “Eternal Thou” through which we interact with all others. Not in “I-It” relationships, but in “I-Thou” relationships which correspond to our relationship with God. Or, more accurately, God's relationship to *us* is such that there are *only* ever “Us-es” and never any “Them-s.”

Having checked the orthodoxy box, we are now free to bend our minds a bit and go a step further where the real fruit is to be found. Having remembered and established that all existence is relational and and that we must chose the nature of those relationships, the next question should be where and when do we experience the kind of “I-Thou” relationships that Buber advocates, and the “I-Great Thou” sense of belonging that the Apostle Paul exhorts? Enter my friend, Father Jim Vacco.

VII.

Or, as my mother-in-law, Francie Potter, referred to him, simply “Vacco.” Be it as the Pastor-in-Residence at St. Bonaventure University and also its Campus Minister, or as the parish priest for 22 years at the Catholic Church across the street known as “Little Bonas,” Father Vacco was figure in Allegany, NY, my wife Linda's home town.

Linda's parents were differently devout. Her mother, Francie, is a devout Catholic and her father, Bob, was a devout Presbyterian (who was also church school teacher for teenagers most of his life, the Clerk of Session, and Co-

Chair of the Pastoral Nominating Committee that called to that church). As described in his obituary, Father Vacco was, “a beloved educator, pastor and counselor, he served as a Franciscan friar for 48 years and a priest for 43 years.” As head of the Parish Council for many years, Francie came to consider Vacco a friend, confidant and, very often, her partner in crime.

VIII.

Which is how I first came to know Father Vacco, as he was often invited to family events and holiday get-togethers. Beyond such casual and occasional chats, our friendship was born on a day I will always remember, and came to fullness on another day I could never imagine nor will I ever forget.

The first was a wonderful day he spent with us at the lake in the summer of 2013. Early in his ministry, Fr. Vacco actually served a church here in the North County over near Croghan, and would sometimes return for rest and respite staying with friends long ago made. During one such jaunt, Linda’s sister, Mary, her husband, Pete, and their children Nic and Bethany were also up visiting us. The Pendl family is also differently devout, and it was Fr. Vacco who officiated their wedding, and Baptized each of their children. Being from Allegany and knowing Fr. Vacco well, they were aware he would be in the area and so Pete (being Pete) extended Fr. Vacco an invitation to come join them (and us) for a day at the lake. Which, as it happened, was a real “hand of God” thing.

IX.

What a wonderful day we shared! We frolicked in the sun, played in, on, and around the water, feasted, had ton of fun and, good Lord, how we laughed! I was reminded of all of this the other day owing to the digital photo frame we received as a Christmas gift from our kids. If you have a lot of digital photos I would highly recommend such a frame as it brings to life so many moments and memories of the past. Recently, and unbeknownst to me, Linda added to the frame a photo of me and Fr. Vacco from that day at the lake. I was glancing at the frame when it appeared, and it made me stop right in my tracks and, then, I got an enormous grin on my face.



The other day we shared, the one can never forget, came a little over a year later at the funeral of Pete and Mary's son, Nic, with whom we shared that day at the lake. A 19 year old student at Paul Smith's at the time, Nic had just returned for the Fall semester when he suffered an out-of-the-blue seizure which caused him to roll down a slight hill and land facedown in just a few inches of water.

X.

Father Vacco officiated the funeral Mass at Little Bona's that day. A day which saw the sanctuary filled to overflowing with people spilling out of every door. I had been asked to give the homily, however. Just before the service started he and I went to the sacristy to don our liturgical garb. Before we walked out into the sanctuary he asked if we might pray? "Of course," I said, "but you'll have to do the praying." As we held each other's hand I began to weep. I had certainly cried before in my life, either out of sadness or loss or frustration or pain. Up until that day, however, I don't think I ever really wept as a complete and utter pouring out of emotion.

These days, I can pretty much weep at the drop of a hat. The cup of sadness I seem to bear is forever filled right up to the rim and so spills over

easily. After great consideration I have decided this is no kind of negative or sign of a problem but, rather, simply what it means to spend over 30 years in parish ministry. That one is still *able* to weep is a blessing for which we should be tremendously grateful as it is much preferred to the alternative.

XI.

When I wrote the first version of this sermon it contained no mention of Nic, or Father Vacco, or of such days as I know I would *never* be able to deliver such a sermon from the pulpit, live, and in front of all of you. I would only end up weeping. It was hard enough looking at my computer screen through teary eyes as I typed the words. However, once the Session decided to preemptively cancel worship this Sunday owing to the cold, I saw an opportunity to go back and rewrite the sermon to include these things as Father Vacco has been greatly on my mind having died this past December 19th (which, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, is the Feast of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker). I saw this as an opportunity to say things I would never be able to speak.

XII.

Standing in the sacristy, Father Vacco put his arms around me in a gentle embrace and just held me while I wept with great heaves, and shutters, and groanings too deep for words. Eventually, we did enter the sanctuary and conduct the service, but I was the reason we started so late. If it hadn't been for Father Vacco I could have never done such a thing. Delivering that homily with dear ones sitting right there in front of me in a room full of people raw with grief and all of us seeking an answer as to why, was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do in my life. I would give almost anything to not to have lived that day and, certainly, that the reason we had to live it never had come to pass.

I learned a great deal that day, though. About myself, and family, and ministry, and the power of love, and the practice of faith. And, by the time the day was done I had found myself not just a friend and one could comfort me, but one who was a true Shepherd of the Sheep.

XIII.

Father Vacco died in the night at age of 70. In the morning he was found sitting at his desk at the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Friary in Pulaski, Wisconsin. They brought Father Vacco home to southwestern New York and was laid to rest where he grew up near his paren't' fruit and vegetable farm. Later, a celebration of Father Vacco's life took place at St. Bonaventure University with the room filled to overflowing and people spilling out of every door.

I share all of this with you this morning in order to illustrate that our past is a powerful thing. No matter how far we travel from it, somehow we can always see it, right there, in the rear view mirror of our mind as we drive the road of our lives. While it is true we must occasionally shift our gaze to it in order to orient ourselves, constant viewing of the past proves problematic to the point distraction, if not disaster.

XIV.

Correspondingly, the future is *equally* curious. When making such a long journey as life it is easy to become fixated on thoughts of the final stretch if not, solely, the ultimate destination. With the mind riding so far out in front of us, we easily miss all that is to found in the landscape through which we pass at any given moment. Sometimes, our thoughts get so far ahead we forgot the importance of the task at hand, which is to drive the car, to live our lives. Like taking a long road trip, the challenge of life is to keep a distance on what lies behind us, while not losing ourselves to what lies ahead and, at the same time, we must watch our speed. Simply put, we must drive each mile in its own moment; for it is *only* in such moments that the "Great Thou" resides and it is there, and only there, that belonging is to be found.

XV.

Imagine, if you will, that you are a car traveling at speed down a highway as you live your life. Ideally, you'd like to have a safe and comfortable distance between the cars in back of you and the cars in front of you. More often it is case, however, that the past creeps right up on our back bumper, while, at the same time, we so strain and race to our destination that we tailgate the future. The result is we find our present, the moment of our actual here and now, to be such an exceedingly small space that we are unable to enjoy the road we

travel, have very little room for error, and are incredibly tense from the effort required to keep from getting rear ended by our past and/or impeded by our future.

XVI.

The first step, then, toward discovering a sense of belonging is to simply create more space in-between our past and our future, because the present moment is the *only* place to which we belong, and belonging is to be found. God, the “Great Thou,” does not exist in the past. Nor does God exist in the future. Such conceptions are wholly our own and God does not play by our rules. God *only* exists in the *present*. While our experience of the present is fleeting, God’s present (and *presence*) is eternal. So, the challenge is to put ourselves, the where and the when, into our *own* present where God is only, and ever, to be found.

Now (excuse the double entendre) the astute among us will say, “But, we’re already in our present!?! Yes, but we must be *present* in this present *moment*. And the first step in doing so is to make our present *larger*: to push against the allure of the past and the drive to the future such that the past, present and future aren’t bumper to bumper. So our past and future are not in our face, or on our mind, all the time. So we have a little room to breath and move about in our present. It is our own present, after all, we should be able to do with it what we wish. Don’t you think?”

XVII.

We began today’s sermon with the Apostle Paul’s question to the Corinthian congregation: “To whom do you belong?” If, as Paul seemingly admonishes, we are to belong to God we must first belong to the place and time where God is to be found. Not the past, not the future, only in the present moment. Yes, the present is ours to do with as we wish in accord with free will, but each moment is first and foremost a gift from God that we are to enjoy as a means of *belonging* to God, as a means of being in relationship with God, and in relationship with those around us in this world within which we live.

We only belong to God, not separated by discrete bounds, when we are *present* in the *moment*. This, as an expression of the cross, is foolishness to those who are perishing (bumper to bumper on the road to perdition) but to we “Thous” who are being saved it is the power of the God to whom we belong.

XVIII.

I would like to hope that we have all had someone like Father Vacco in our lives. Someone who has shown us how to relate to each other in an “I-Thou” relationship. A relationship that fills the present moment with the presence of God such that we feel seen, and heard, and comforted, and no longer alone in our trials and tribulations, or in our joys and triumphs, or in our grief and sorrows. A relationship with another through which we might discover ourselves to be the fragile but beautiful child of God we each have been created to be.

The gift Father Vacco gave to me that day in the sacristy of Little Bona’s Church is the same gift each of us have the power to offer one another, now, in our present. All life is relational, and *we* get to choose how we will relate to our past, greet the future, and live in and through our present. It all begins with knowing the “Thou” to whom *we* belong, and through whom we belong to *each other*. And the Thous were heard to say... (Amen.)