

I hate camping. OK, that might be too strong of a statement. I *dislike* camping. I don't know why camping is not my thing. Maybe it's because I grew up a city boy in Hong Kong. More likely, it's because I like the comfort and conveniences of modern society. My ideal way to camp is to have air-conditioning, a nice bed, a roof over my head, and indoor plumbing. Oh, and don't forget wi-fi and pizza delivery.

I know I'm a wimp, but it is hard for me to imagine what it was like for Jesus to be sent out into the wilderness for forty days. If you remember, Jesus had just been baptized, and as He came out of the water, the heavens ripped apart, the Spirit came down like a dove, and a voice spoke to Jesus, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” What an amazing, affirming experience it must have been for Jesus! One of the ultimate questions of life is “Who am I?” and who among us wouldn't want to hear a divine voice affirming us “You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased”?

Alas, it is one thing to *hear* such an affirmation, but it is a totally different thing to actually *believe* it. And there is no better place to test that belief than in the wilderness. After Jesus' baptism, immediately the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, where he stayed for forty days, tempted by Satan. It seems that Mark is less concerned about the temptations themselves than with the *meaning* of Jesus' time in the wilderness. Jesus is retracing Israel's steps in the wilderness to rewrite her history.

Remember back in the Exodus, God brought His people out of slavery in Egypt and told them: “You are no longer slaves; you are a free people.” And yet, in the wilderness, God's people didn't actually believe that they were free. They grumbled against Moses and Aaron. They complained that Moses had brought them all out into the wilderness to starve to death. To the question, “Who are we?” the Israelites basically answered, “We are still slaves. We would rather be slaves in Egypt than be free in this wilderness.”

“Who would rather be slaves in Egypt than be free in the wilderness?”

Recently, sociologist Brené Brown wrote a book called *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand* that provides some insight into this question. She writes that we as human beings have a deep need to belong... whether that's in a family, in a social group, in a faith community. Brown writes: “Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it.”¹

We human beings have a deep need to belong, but when we try to get it by fitting in and by seeking approval, we only get a hollow substitute for belonging. These words echoed in my mind when I interviewed Christian Picciolini a couple of weeks ago. Picciolini is a former neo-Nazi and leader of the American White power movement. He recently published *White American Youth*, a book that recounts his descent into the white supremacist movement and how he got out of it. He now speaks around the world to help groups and communities counter extremist hate groups.

Picciolini came to Charlottesville a couple of weeks ago to speak to community and faith leaders. He shared that growing up as a first-generation immigrant from Italy, he felt like he didn't belong in his neighborhood in Chicago. He was bullied for being short, for his parents not speaking English. He felt he didn't belong at home. He felt lonely and abandoned, because his parents were working all the time to make ends meet and was never

¹ Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (pp. 31-32). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

home. One day while Picciolini was in an alleyway smoking a joint, a man came up to him, snatched the joint from his mouth and said, “That’s what the Jews and the Communists want you to do, to keep you docile.” Picciolini was 14, and looking back he said that he had no idea what a Communist or a Jew was, and he definitely didn’t know what the word docile meant. But that was the first time that Picciolini felt that someone was paying attention to him. And that someone was Clark Martell, the founder of Chicago Area Skinheads. Picciolini joined that group because “They promised me that they would take me out of whatever hell I was living in, whether that was abandonment or marginalization. And to a degree, they delivered. They did give me a new identity. I was now this powerful person. And they gave me a community that accepted me.”²

Picciolini’s story is a real life example of someone who found a shallow substitute for belonging, a person who thought he found salvation through a group that developed an “us vs. them” mentality by demonizing and dehumanizing people who were different than they were. But one experience began to transform his life.

One night Picciolini and his ‘soldiers’ chased a black man out of a restaurant and brutally assaulted him. Picciolini recalled, “At one point when I was kicking him on the ground and his face was swollen, covered in blood, he opened his eyes and they connected with mine. That was the first time I felt empathy for one of my victims. And that was the last time I hurt anybody.”³

But it took Picciolini years from that moment to finally leave the white supremacist movement and turn his life around. While Picciolini might not use these words, I would describe those years as his time in the wilderness. During that time, his wife and children left him. He went through five years of depression. His former skin head friends saw him a traitor and turned their hate towards him. During those wilderness years, I imagine Picciolini was tempted to give up as he faced the wild beasts of the loss of his family, as he endured loneliness, attacks, hatred, misunderstandings, ostracization, and other painful experiences. For all the difficulties that Picciolini experienced during the wilderness, “angels” also tended to him in the form of radical kindness from blacks and Jews who refused to return the hate that he spewed upon them. Picciolini says, “I *received* compassion from the people that I least deserved it from when I least deserve it. That was pivotal in helping me humanize them.”

Brené Brown says, “Theologians, writers, poets, and musicians have always used the wilderness as a metaphor, to represent everything from a vast and dangerous environment where we are forced to navigate difficult trials to a refuge of nature and beauty where we seek space for contemplation. What all wilderness metaphors have in common are the notions of solitude, vulnerability, and an emotional, spiritual, or physical quest.”⁴ For Brown, the wilderness is the place where one learns that true belonging includes *belonging to ourselves*, which is being called to stand alone to brave the wilderness of uncertainty, vulnerability, and criticism.

In any kind of a quest, there is a hope for personal transformation, where one’s true identity emerges and is embraced. For Christian Picciolini, he eventually came to a place where his need for belonging was no longer dependent on others. He came to a place where he could stand alone, comfortable in his own skin, clear about his mission. His belonging is now based on being a part of something larger, the work of helping others understand supremacist groups and escape their enslaving clutches.

In my conversation with Picciolini, I was struck by his vulnerability, his willingness to own his ugly past, and his compassion for white supremacists without sacrificing his conviction that white supremacy is wrong and is a form of domestic terrorism. From my perspective, Picciolini’s story is an example of someone who is braving the wilderness.

² <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rejecting-hate-after-spending-nearly-a-decade-spreading-it/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness*, (pp. 36-37).

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent is a forty-day season of preparation for Easter. The forty days represent the time Jesus spent in the wilderness. Jesus' time in the wilderness challenges us to look at the pain in our souls or the ways we measure our belonging and frame our identity. As followers of Jesus, we fast, whether literally or metaphorically, to train ourselves to "give up" or "let go" of certain things, such as these fears or these insecurities that tempt us to see ourselves as someone other than the children of God. We are invited to ask ourselves, "Would I rather remain enslaved in my Egypt than be free in a wilderness?"

This is not just a personal question, but a question that challenges our society. What would we as a society choose to be enslaved by, rather than be free in braving the wilderness? As we hear about the gun deaths in our country, the opioid crises, the continuing oppression of people of color, the uncertain plight of children of immigrants, we can choose to continue to be enslaved or we can choose to brave the wilderness.

As we brave the wilderness, we will be tempted to worship the gods of power, money, and influence. We will encounter wild animals -- like loneliness, rejection, the unmasking of our insecurities and our biases. But instead of running away from those wild animals in fear, can we face them and arrive at a place of peace so that we just *stay* with those wild animals, like Jesus? Instead of anxiously worrying about the future and frantically trying to secure and control, can we allow the angels of God to attend to us with God's daily bread?

Today, we are invited to walk the Lenten way of braving the wilderness. As we go, may we hear the voice of God and follow the steps of Christ. Amen.