

Belonging  
October 16, 2022

<sup>9</sup> He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup> “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

I officiated a wedding yesterday.  
and sensed their joy and relief  
in their profound sense of belonging, one to the other.

We all belong from the beginning,  
We take shape inside the body of another human being.  
we are flesh of our mother’s flesh,  
bone of her bone

Once we are born  
we hope that that sense of belonging continues  
for it forms our sense of self,  
our trust in the world, and in a loving creator.

We grow, seek autonomy, identity  
our own sense of belonging,

to our own people,  
our own person.

and we find  
and connection and disconnection  
and love and loneliness  
and we wonder if we belong anywhere,  
if we are just here,  
or if we really belong to God.

I got a text on Tuesday.  
*Hi Mike, how about lunch.*  
I text back, sorry not Mike.  
*I'm so sorry,*  
Its alright, I've got lunch plans anyway. Enjoy!

She says, *you are kind,*  
*I'm Midoro from Japan,*  
*I sell exercise equipment and clothing,*  
what do you do.  
*I'm a pastor from Ohio*  
and then brace for the quite get away.  
Oh, dear pastor, she texts.  
*I have been told I am one of the sealed.*  
*Here's my Whats App number, let's talk.*

Midoro means she is one of the 144,000 we hear about in  
a vision found in the  
7<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Book of Revelations:  
Angels place a seal of protection  
around 144,000 servants of God  
Jehovah's witnesses interpret this to mean that  
just 144,000 of all those who have lived since Jesus' death,

will be resurrected as immortal spirit,  
to spend eternity with God and Christ.

The ultimate in belonging, to God and Christ.

And I say, *Good for her!*

she has been told this good news,  
and she accepts that she is fully accepted by God  
and so lives with a profound sense  
of belonging now and forever.

But the dilemma for Midoro, as Jesus sees it,  
is when such an awareness, sense of belonging to God,  
can breed a sense of self-righteousness,  
and contempt for others' relative lowliness.

a contempt which we logically assume  
God somehow shares.

*Thank you, God, that I am not like this other person,*  
says the Pharisee.

Jesus may be talking about the elite religious class,  
but don't we all say that  
or a version of that?  
I do.

When we see someone who, is obviously  
going the wrong way.  
someone whom we most vehemently disagree  
on matters most important.  
and we mutter, in so many words  
*Thank you, God, that I am not that person.*

We think this politically,  
with the dictators and flawed leaders  
and their followers, past and present.  
And is there a convinced Republican or Democrat  
who does not utter this prayer  
*Thank you, God, that I am not like those  
on the other side.*

Our denomination is in the process of splintering,  
in a month, we will have a special session  
of conference to vote on allowing  
as many as 85 churches and pastors  
to leave the denomination  
with their property.

Either side of may be  
tempted in to repeat the words  
of the pharisee,  
*thank God I am not like them*

And yet, if we believe,  
as scripture clearly tells us,  
that everything that is  
comes from God's own being.  
that creation, all creation, all that is  
every life, as well as every rock and scrap of metal,  
every bee, flower, cloud, star,  
as well as you and the person  
you are glad you are not,  
are born out of God' own being,  
created from divine love  
and live in that love.

And that God who is love  
is not standing outside of creation

Where would that be=?  
and if God is love, then surely this universe  
is the material manifestation of love,  
is the body of love, of God  
in whom we, all of us,  
everything, dwells.

If we allow ourselves to believe that, as Jesus tells us  
as Paul tells us in his letter to the *Romans*,  
that *nothing is separated from the God*  
perhaps we would be less inclined  
to see others outside the fold.

Neither the Pharisee  
who is grateful for who he is  
nor the tax collector  
who is penitent for who he is not.

They both belong, says Jesus  
one needs to know it,  
the other needs the humility to see it in others.

Which is what church is about.

I was in youth group growing up,  
and even though I wasn't among the pretty or athletic  
or smart or popular ones in school,  
I belonged, everyone did.  
That's what made youth group special,  
we belonged to youth group,  
and we belonged to each other.

And when I moved just before my Junior year of High school

and went to another church  
in another denomination,  
and joined another youth group  
Almost immediately,  
I belonged there, too.

Everyone who comes belongs,  
isn't that the most important rule  
of youth group?

Doesn't everything else flow from that?:  
respect, cooperation, community?

and isn't that the most important rule for church  
as a whole,  
this group of people  
called out to be the body of Christ  
in this life  
and, for us,  
on this corner,  
a community that we allow ourselves  
to belong to,  
and be shaped by.

You have chosen this body, this church, for a variety of reasons.  
Some of you grew up here.  
Some found your way decades ago,  
and some have just arrived.  
and you all sense a belonging.  
or a yearning to belong.

There is a sense of reliability, here,  
a financial grounding due to faithful  
stewardship across generations,

and a maturity of spirit,  
a willingness to stay and love one another  
across our differences  
even when it's hard.

Which means we believe what Jesus is saying in this story  
that we all belong,  
we belong to God  
we are truly all part of the body of Christ.

and when we walk out under the night sky,  
and gaze upon the stars  
or look upon the trees in their firely colors,  
or upon stranger or friend,  
there is no need to feel estranged  
for the love that formed each and all  
abides and each and all,  
knowingly or unknowingly  
abide in God.

From the beginning you have belonged,  
you, me, Midoro, and her 144,000,  
and the Pharisee, and the tax collector,  
and that belonging never ends.

What good news.

Amen.