9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 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. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13 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!’ 14 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,*

It’s alright, I’ve got lunch plans anyway. Enjoy!

She says, *you are kind,*

*I’m Mldoro 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 WhatsApp number, let’s talk.*

Midoro means she is one of the 144,000 we hear about in
a vision found in the
7th 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.