



The Justice of Belonging

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

Isaiah 56:1-9; August 16, 2020

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each person Beloved. **Amen.**

How often in your life have you felt as if you belonged?

Belonging is tricky. My daughter is in middle school and there is a certain kind of middle school fashion—certain kids who are identified by having hydroflasks, and wearing crop tops, and making certain sounds and having a particular nickname. My daughter doesn't feel like she belongs to that group. When I was in high school I lived in Belgium and though I didn't feel as if I belonged in that country, because I didn't speak the languages and I didn't instinctively kiss people to greet them instead of shake their hands and I came from a country that was only a few hundred years old instead of thousands of years old, I did go to a high school with lots of other international students and none of us belonged, so we all did. I have been close to alcoholics for many years, and many of those I know who grew up with alcoholic parents have shared with me that they often feel as if there are invisible rules in social life that everyone else knows, but they

doesn't know them, and never know when they might inadvertently trip over one of them. It's hard to feel you belong when you don't know the rules.

Belonging can be something we take for granted. The Crandalls always sit in the pews behind Chad's piano. I can visualize where you all sit in the chapel and in the sanctuary and the 8:00 and the 9:00 and the 11:00 service. I can see Andy playing his accordion and Steve Schewe inviting you all to sing and the festival choir making their procession up the center aisle to sit in the choir stalls in the chancel. I can see Ivy and John Corlett warmly welcoming newcomers and Mary Miller caring for the altar. I can see little 4 year old Russell Anderson sitting at Chad's feet during the postlude, in rapt attention watching Chad play the organ. I can see Craig Franke in the kitchen for brew crew helping get people coffee in the parish hall. I see Courtney Hammond acolyting and standing with me and others at the altar holding sacred space, bearing the cross and the candles and the symbols of all that is holy.

And we yearn to return to our beautiful building, and the sacred ways we encounter God and create meaning together, and the rhythms of gathering that tell us we belong together. We know that there are deeper wounds in the body of belonging in our country. We know that refugees and immigrants live in fear of being sent against their will back to the country they came from. We know that trans folk are at high risk of being bullied and of suicide. We know that those

who have the highest claim of belonging to this land, the Lakota and Ojibwe and other indigenous nations, have been systematically slaughtered and rounded up and sent to small pockets of land and promised support that did not come and for which they continue to suffer. And we know that there is an invisible rule in this country that says skin that looks like mine is “normal,” whereas skin of other hues is “other.”

Throughout time humans have struggled with this primary problem—the problem of who belongs and who does not. Our scriptures tell stories of a thousand different ways the people of Israel were at home and not at home, belonged and did not. They were called to a land they did not know, where they lived as sojourners. They were enslaved and brutalized and then they escaped and wandered the wilderness, homeless. They took the lands of others and slaughtered their inhabitants and became the oppressor instead of being the oppressed. They set up kingdoms and ruled for many generations. They were conquered and sent into exile. They returned and were conquered again, and remained at home, with others to rule them and tell them which of their sacred traditions they could keep and which they would be killed for keeping.

At the time the reading from Isaiah was written, the people of Israel had begun to return to Jerusalem after having been exiled. Their temple had been burned to the ground and they had begun to rebuild. There was debate about who could belong. Perhaps they did not want anyone not like them to

be with them. Perhaps they did not feel safe around people who were different because they had been conquered and sent into exile by others. But into this time of return, God sent prophets in the tradition of Isaiah to them. And into this time of debate about who could belong and how they could be safe, God tells the people to keep justice and to keep righteousness, to hold fast to these things, because God is going to make so many people belong. God is bringing the children of Israel, and also the foreigner. There are verses in today's reading that the lectionary does not include which say that God makes the eunuchs belong—those who have different sexuality and gender. The end of today's reading says that God gathers the outcasts and makes them belong on God's holy mountain and in God's house of prayer.

God's holy mountain is a reference to Mount Sinai, where God met Moses in the burning bush, and sent him to free the children of Israel. The holy mountain is where God met Moses again after they left Egypt to give them the Ten Commandments, a new way to live, guidance about how to behave after centuries of having been slaves. The mountain of course is not a temple. They had no way to have a temple when they were in the wilderness, but God met them just the same. God's house of prayer is what they were trying to establish when they returned from exile, maybe like we might feel when we finally get a vaccine and get to return to our building, but God is making very clear that the House of God is always going to be for a bigger range of people than we thought belonged.

Now don't worry, the Crandalls can still sit in their pew. I still so yearn for the time I can stand around the altar with the acolytes and intercessors and ministers. And God is always bringing others—foreigners and eunuchs and outcasts. In today's terms, this might mean immigrants and LGBTQ folks and homeless and alcoholics and those who just don't understand the social rules everyone else seems to take for granted. God is always seeking for those who feel they do not belong.

At the deepest level, in the eyes of God, there is a place of safety and connection that no one can touch. Whether we have our building and our traditions or not, we are connected by the God whose will is always to seek and save those who are excluded and brutalized. That includes the victims of sexual violence. That includes those who have been oppressed who themselves have become oppressors. That includes our Lakota and Ojibwe brothers and sisters. That includes African Americans and immigrants and also KKK members and tea party libertarians and the innocent and the guilty.

Many of you have felt so alive during our recent exploration about following the Way of Jesus by dismantling racism. Others have felt you do not belong in that conversation. Church has become unrecognizable to you. Zoom is not stained glass, and videos are not communion. I heartily agree that church is not a social justice nonprofit and that we are not all called to follow Jesus by participating in marches or

putting black lives matter signs in our yard. And yet following Jesus is always about a sense of belonging that transcends all other categories of identity. It's always about meeting God in the temple and also on the mountain. It's about being part of this beautiful St. John's community and also knowing that we belong simply because we are children of God, deeply and irrevocably, and that to deny anyone else the right to belong is not only unjust, but also blasphemy against the communal God in whose image all are made.

And this is why the prophet Isaiah says to the newly returned exiles who are trying to figure out who should belong and who should not, that God welcomes foreigners, God welcomes eunuchs, God gathers the outcasts. In verse one the prophet asks God's people to "maintain justice and do what is right," because God's righteousness and God's salvation are at hand, and justice, righteousness and salvation are all intertwined.

And this is why justice is not just a social and political issue but also a spiritual one. It doesn't mean God calls us all to engage in the same way. We are the body of Christ and we are very different. Some are called to march, others are called to pray without ceasing. Some are called to advocate for public policy and some are called to serve the hungry. But we are all called to bear witness to the truth that ALL belong, and that the violence and injustice and racism that is so pervasive in our common life is contrary to the commandments of God.

So let us rejoice that we can meet God in the house of prayer in our building and also on the holy mountain in the wilderness, whether that's in your neighborhood or in the boundary waters or at 38th and Chicago or the Healing Prayer Tent in North Minneapolis. Let's rejoice that nothing and no one can take away our deep communion with God in Christ, whether we are able to physically participate in the Eucharist or not. Let's accept the Spirit's leading to heal that which is sick, including the sickness of white supremacy culture and all kinds of violence, and rejoice that God grants us this beautiful community to do this pilgrimage together. You belong. You belong. So does your neighbor. Thanks be to God.