The Rev. Kimberly Reinholz
Church of the Holy Spirit
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Luke 18 9-14

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches those who are self-righteous and view others with contempt with a parable comparing the Pharisee and the tax collector, their prayer lives, and their role in first-century Temple Culture. If there was a poll of the average Jewish person in Jerusalem in Jesus' time, and it asked: "Who would be 'in ' and who would be 'out ' of God's favor?" Pretty much everyone would see the Pharisee and the Tax Collector as belonging and being an outsider, respectively. Although both men are found praying in the Temple in Jesus' parable, the average person would assume that the Pharisee would be closer to God. After all, they are the ones who pay their tithes, study the scriptures, and Jewish laws, and enforce them. The tax collector on the other hand have sold out. Because they are employed by the Romans, they are believed to have betrayed their own people because they work for the Romans levying taxes and expecting folks to follow the oppressive Roman laws.

The Pharisee also believes that they are better off than the tax collector actually naming in their prayer all the ways in which they are better than their neighbor. The tax collector on the other hand does not claim anything other than their sinfulness, and seeks God's mercy. The Pharisee claims the upper hand, while the tax collector doesn't compare himself to anyone else.

While comparison is often thought of as the thief of joy as Theodore Roosevelt is

accredited with saying, it could in this context that comparison is the barrier to grace. For the Pharisee at least, they appear to be more concerned with playing the part- saying the proper prayers, offering the prescribed sacrifices, interpreting the law correctly, and doing it all while at the same time not being like any of those "lesser" people- thieves, rogues, adulterers, and even this tax collector.

In the research of Brene Brown, social worker, researcher, author and public speaker, the actions of the Pharisee can be categorized as "fitting in" in our contemporary culture. The Pharisee is doing what he can to show that he is playing a part, doing what is expected of him, and assimilating to the dominant culture of the Temple rather than being fully welcomed as he is in the community of the Temple.

The tax collector, however, is engaging in a style of prayer that is not performative, that does not look back upon his actions and tick off how he has been successful and met proverbial benchmarks; instead, he shows up fully, vulnerably, and honestly speaking to God and asking for mercy. In her book, Braving the Wilderness, Brown says that

"True belonging is not passive. It's not the belonging that comes with just joining a group. It's not fitting in or pretending or selling out because it's safer. It's a practice that requires us to be vulnerable, get uncomfortable, and learn how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are. We want true belonging, but it takes tremendous courage to knowingly walk into hard moments."

It can be hard to understand the divisive nature of this parable from the distance of 2000+ years and more than 5,000 miles.

But by reflecting on it from the perspective of belonging and fitting in within membership in the 21st Century Church, we can begin to see how, at times, life in the big "C" Church is not all that different from life in the Temple culture. Belonging to a community and fitting into a group are distinctly different ways of being in relationship with others.

Fitting in is like playing a part, making one's self into an image to reflect what others desire, squeezing into a too tight shoe, or wearing pink because that is what they do on Wednesdays.

Belonging is showing up authentically, precisely as one experiences the world — body, mind, and soul.

The Church only has one expectation for belonging: the sacrament of baptism.

Being baptized into the household of God, marked as Christ's own forever, and sealed by the Holy Spirit means that there is nothing anyone can do that can rescind the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting promised through Jesus Christ. As we begin the liturgy of Holy Baptism we believe - There is One lord, One faith, One baptism, One God and Father of All. Once you are in, you are in, no take backs, no reverses, no do-overs.

Belonging to the Household of God, doesn't require anything of us but a contrite heart which means showing up and being vulnerable with one another. Not trusting in our own righteousness not saying how good we are and comparing ourselves to our neighbors, our friends, our enemies.

Beloved, siblings in faith, incorporated members of the Body of Christ in the world

recognize that there is no prerequisite to receive God's eternal, living grace.

The Church is not a place for 'fitting in'; individuals should be able to show up as they are, because God loves each of us as we are. God doesn't have favorite children, but loves each of person as made in a brilliant reflection of God's image.

God longs for us to recongize when we have strayed, to repent and return to a right relationship with God, with our neighbor and with creation. But that recognition is not necessary for us to be loved as we are by people who love God. That recognition cannot be coerced or compelled out of anything other than a contrite and willing heart that is open to the knowledge and love of God.
We ought to keep this in mind as we come to understand belonging to a community that calls itself Church. What are the spoken and un-spoken expectations placed upon not only ourselves, but also on others that may be a barrier to knowing God honestly and openly, rather than attempting to contort ourselves into what a "perfect christian" looks like, says, or does?

Perhaps belonging to CHS is one how those most authentic tax collector-esque selves, can bring someone along on some Sunday to see if this is the parish where they belong as well.

No need for the litany of how much better one is than those people over there, but fully admitting the shortcomings and recognizing the faults because in that our reliance not on our own righteousness, but on God's grace as the basis for forgiveness, reconciliation, and membership in God's beloved community is evident. Not in our individual actions, but in God's holy presence and complete

acceptance of who each and every one of us are.
Amen