

Belonging II: Making Room for Imperfection

John 8: 2-11

Todd Smith Lippert

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This is our second week in a series on belonging. How do we find it? What needs to be in place so that we can offer it, receive it, trust that we have it? How can we be a church that stretches the circle of belonging?

As Abby said last week, we remain in conversation with the patron saint of First UCC, Brene Brown who researches shame, and vulnerability and trust. Many here have read her book *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*.

I wanted to spend some time with this story from the Gospel of John for today, because in this story we see Jesus doing what the church should do, he expands the circle of belonging. He gives this woman accused of adultery a place to stand. But he also, brilliantly, creates the foundational atmosphere that is necessary for people to feel like the circle can stretch to include them. He reminds everyone of their sin and imperfection, without shaming, and when this is taken to heart it leads to a posture of compassion towards the neighbor.

Today's story from the Gospel of John is not in the earliest manuscripts of the gospel. At some point as this gospel is being passed around in the early church, and copies are being made, someone adds this story to the gospel and it becomes a part of our story. IF you look carefully in the Bible, you will see that this story has brackets around it, signaling it is a later addition. It's still a good story. It also contains what has become one of the most famous lines from the New Testament.

Jesus is teaching in the temple, all the people come to him. Big crowd. The Scribes and Pharisees bring a woman to him who they say has been caught in the very act of adultery. They say the law of Moses says she should be put to death. "What do you say, Jesus?"

Those in the story and those hearing this story who know the law of Moses would know that some things aren't quite right. First, there are no witnesses who come along with the Scribes and Pharisees, the law requires two or three for the death sentence. Second, the law calls for the death penalty for the man too in the case of adultery. There are clues, right away that this isn't really about the law, it isn't really about this woman who is being humiliated in front of everyone, the Scribes and Pharisees are trying to score points in an ongoing debate with Jesus.

It's a trap. If Jesus sides with the woman, the Scribes and Pharisees can say Jesus has left behind the law. If he says he sides with the law, everyone there already knows that something unjust is happening to this woman. So how does Jesus get out of this trap?

Jesus bends down and starts writing on the ground. I like to imagine what Jesus is writing on the ground, "what do I do, what do I do? God, make them go away." This is a first century way of dismissing the conversation. It's like pulling out your phone while someone is in your talking to you face to face and deciding that it would be more interesting to scroll through Twitter.

The Scribes and Pharisees don't accept his refusal to engage and they keep talking at him, so finally Jesus stands up, he puts his phone away, and he says, "Let anyone among you who is without sin throw the first stone."

Then he goes back to writing, he goes back to looking for new cat videos on YouTube.

Everyone is quiet. Then the elders start leaving, the community heroes, the revered ones, they are up on a pedestal, they go. They are saying, "Yeah, I've got my sins. I'm out." The scribes and pharisees leave, the ones who have been distorting the law and humiliating this woman for their own gain, and are caught in it. Everyone else leaves and only the woman is left. Jesus straightens, acts surprised, "Oh, is no one here to condemn you? Then I don't either. Go your way and from now on do not sin again."

Through this simple statement, Jesus does something amazing for his time. He treats an accused woman as an equal; equal to the elders, the revered ones; equal to the Scribes and Pharisees, those with authority; equal to everyone in the crowd. He brings down the powerful and raises up the lowly, just as the scripture says. Through this simple statement, Jesus reminds everyone of their imperfection, he reminds everyone of their sin. He doesn't shame them, he simply reminds them that it is a part of the human condition. Everyone in the crowd has failed to love God and neighbor in one way or another. And they all know it when he brings it up. It isn't that anything goes for Jesus. He still finds a way to unravel the unjust intentions of the Scribes and Pharisees, but it's like he even has compassion for them as he stops what they are doing.

Jesus doesn't just stretch the circle to include this woman who has been accused, he holds the boundaries of the circle open so that there is room for everyone to fit inside.

One of Brene Brown's early books is titled, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, and in that book she defines belonging like this:

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. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.

This is very powerful. “True belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world,” and “our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.”

So our ability to feel like we belong anywhere, whether this is somewhere we have been forever, or we are stepping into a new community or situation, depends on our ability to accept our imperfect selves, those things we least like to see in ourselves. In our story we see Jesus accepting everyone's imperfections.

And, I think, if we see a community as one organism, a church as one body, the sense of belonging in that body will never be greater than our ability to accept the imperfections in one another. The more we can accept imperfections in one another, the more people will say, “I can belong here.” It doesn't mean that anything goes, but we nurture a posture of compassion towards one another.

During the Snownado that hit Northfield last week, our family watched A League of their Own, the 1992 movie about the All American Girls Professional Baseball League that was formed during World War II as men's professional baseball was temporarily shut down. The movie has something for everyone in our family: sports, the struggle for gender equity, singing and dancing.

The movie has characters who are looking for belonging, and the team itself becomes a community, a body, looking for belonging in the midst of a society that is dismissive of them.

Two of the main characters are sisters and the star Dottie, is the oldest, and the youngest, Kit, is always in her sister's shadow. She is desperate to prove she is just as good, thinking that then she will prove her worth.

One of the characters, Marla is an amazing hitter, but a scout doesn't think she is pretty enough to be on the team. The sisters protest and say they won't play unless she plays and the scout backs down. Not surprisingly, Marla is extremely shy and unsure of herself.

One player is ashamed she can't read. Another, May is running from her life as a taxi dancer.

The manager Jimmy Dugan is a former major leaguer whose career was cut short because of injury and alcohol. He's ashamed that the only job he can get in baseball is as a manager in the women's league, and he's drinking to make the shame go away.

As the movie unfolds, all of these characters go on a journey of accepting themselves and finding acceptance too. But the individual acceptance goes hand in hand with accepting the imperfections in one another. It is hard to tell which comes first. The women don't judge the imperfections of the others on the team, but come together and start helping one another through their challenges. The players start accepting and having compassion on their imperfect manager, and the manager accepts and has compassion for his players. He starts to call them ballplayers, his ultimate compliment. Not because they have improved, they have always been very good, but because he is seeing them and valuing them for who they are and have always been.

The team as a whole becomes a place of belonging. They accept the imperfections in one another and at the same time they become more and more certain of who they are even in the face of a society that doesn't think they belong. Over time though, the team starts to win everyone over. Those on the team and then everyone who watches them, are transformed.

I think this is what the church can be at its best. We are a community rooted in unconditional love. We are to be a community that expands the circle to invite others into belonging here. And, as we trust that this unconditional love of God that is here, we start becoming brave enough to see and admit the imperfection that is in us. Rather than feeling ashamed, we look upon one another with more and more compassion, and we start coming together. When this starts happening, all sorts of transformation becomes possible.

May it be so. Amen.