

- I. **My first trip to Berkeley Bowl was a miserable experience.**
- A. I had recently moved from Iowa City to Berkeley. Disorienting experience going from living in a place where you have a very full life with lots of close relationships to living somewhere where you know pretty much no one. On top of that, it's a place that prides itself on its distinct culture; a culture you admire but aren't a part of cause you've been living in small town midwest. As left of center as Iowa City, sometimes known as the People's Republic of Johnson County, might be **there's only one Berkeley**.
- B. In Iowa City, when you want to go grocery shopping you go to **HyVee which is like Safeway with more midwestern friendliness and charm**. It's a great place to shop with kids. They always have lots of carts shaped like cars so the kids can drive while you're shopping. The bakery has a jar of free cookies for children, and the check out clerk always gives them stickers. Needless to say, HyVee is a bit different from Berkeley Bowl.
- C. The first thing I noticed as I pulled into the lot is **how narrow the spaces were**. I drive a car that is this weird super-size wagon. When we bought, we prided ourselves that it was **technically NOT a mini-van**. But it's pretty much the size of one. It was a busy afternoon at the Bowl with lots of cars around. Someone pulls out of a spot and I identify it as the spot I should take. I start to try to turn in and notice I'm gonna have to do some serious maneuvering to try to jimmy my car into this narrow place. The kids for some reason are hyped up and yelling, singing, fighting while I'm attempting parking gymnastics, so **I'm trying to breathe deep and keep parking without scraping any of the nearby Priuses, and then I hear it**. The horn from the car behind me. A guy in his 50s in a cute little roadster with his wife is honking at me. I roll down my window and he yells "You're too big for that spot!!! Go find another one. You're not going to fit!" My face went red. I backed up and drove to another part of the lot, while the guy in the roadster swooped into my tiny spot.
- D. And then I went inside, my three kids in tow. There I encountered tiny aisles. No car cart. **People serenely squeezing tomatoes and pondering rudebhga while my kids bounced through the aisles trying to find the free cookies**. They started crashing the cart into the aisles or into other shoppers. **They were bored and antsy and loud while I was trying to find all the things in my list in a foreign environment with very small aisles**. At some point I started texting Jason stressed out messages so I didn't shout my feelings in the store or at my kids. "Just get out of there" he wrote. And so I did. I paid for my half a list of groceries and hastened our family back to our oversized vehicle as quickly as possible.
- E. In retrospect, it wasn't the size of my car, the guy in the lot, or the tiny aisles at Berkeley Bowl that was the problem. **It was the way all of these things played upon my insecurities**. Here in this new environment, I was afraid I didn't fit in at the Berkeley Bowl. That ultimately, I wasn't **Berkeley Enough**. I feared that this song was actually about me. **(play clip.)**
- F. **When the guy in the roadster shouted "you're too big, you're not going to fit" it was like he vocalized my own internal fear about our ability to make a life in Berkeley**. My family was too big. I had three kids, when most parents I met only had one or two. My kids were loud and out of control in the store, perhaps because I do actually let them eat processed foods and God-forbid sugar sometimes, not simply snack on carrot sticks and edamame. They haven't yet learned yoga. I was sure in the store that day that all of these genuine Berkeley-ites were seeing me and like the guy in the car, thinking "she doesn't fit". And it was an ugly feeling.
- G. Well, I start with this story because **I hope that it's one that all of us can relate to in some way. The struggle to fit in somewhere**. Maybe you felt it as a kid in school, maybe when you started a new job, maybe when you moved to a new city. Eventually most of us usually settle in somewhere. We make friends. We learn the culture. (Personally, I love the Berkeley Bowl now that I've lived here going on two years.) But before that happens, we often have to **endure**

the questions around acceptance. Will we be accepted? Will we find a place in our social setting to know and be known? Will we Belong?

- H. Today is the second teaching in a series I started last week called **“In Search of Beauty”**, **where we’re exploring how we cultivate more awe, more wonder, more beauty in our lives, and how Jesus-centered spirituality might contribute to that.** We talked about how researchers here in Berkeley have demonstrated that an awareness of beauty, a sense of awe, motivates us as humans to be kinder to one another, to be less self-absorbed, and more willing to contribute to something beyond ourselves. So it’s an important thing to cultivate.
- I. **One of the sources of awe for many people comes in the context of emotionally connected relationships.** Romantic relationships, family relationships, deep friendships, at their best offer us something different than the fear of rejection and the anxiety over acceptance I experienced when I moved to Berkeley. They offer us a satisfying sense of belonging, that feeds our spirits and can stimulate our awe.
- J. **Religion** as it’s often been preached and practiced through the centuries in many different contexts has been **an exercise in trying to secure acceptance.** Perhaps we fear the rejection of a church, of a spiritual leader, ultimately of God, and so in an effort to appease the gods we offer various sacrifices, we perform various rituals, we try to engage in behaviors that will make us seem more worthy to the spiritual authority in question, that will secure our acceptance, that will gain us some blessing.
- K. **Or maybe we come to realize that the rituals are not worth our time,** and acceptance by some spiritual authority is too much work or even offensive to our sensibilities (who put them in charge anyway?) **so we give up on the whole endeavor.** But is this kind of performance for acceptance what is expected of us when it comes to Jesus? Is “fitting in” a prerequisite for connection to Jesus?

II. Luke 19:1-10

- A. context - Jesus has been traveling all throughout Judea ministering to folks for 3 years. Now he’s en route to Jerusalem for final showdown. To get to Jerusalem, he passes through Jericho. Here’s what happens
- B. Read Text:

Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. 2 There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. 3 He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way.

5 When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. “Zacchaeus!” he said. “Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today.”

6 Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. 7 But the people were displeased. “He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,” they grumbled.

8 Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, “I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!”

9 Jesus responded, “Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.”

III. Jesus Notices Zacchaeus

- A. Zacchaeus is a margin dweller. He is not someone who “fits in”.

1. **He's the chief tax collector - lowest of the low in Jewish eyes.** Tax collectors are the guys who were Jewish and they had agreed to collect the taxes on behalf of Rome from their Jewish countryman. This already makes them unpopular; in cahoots with the oppressive occupying government. But **the way they got paid was through exploiting others.** They would tell people they owed a certain amount, and force them to pay it, meanwhile only a portion of that was what was owed to Rome. The rest, the tax collector got to keep as profit. These guys are kind of like the mob or war lords, generally considered a group of low lifes who are rich at other peoples expense. They're traitors. The Romans don't regard them as peers, they don't fit in with them, but they're working in cahoots with the Romans so the Jews feel betrayed by them. And Zacchaeus is the chief tax collector so he must be extra good at wringing money out of people, and understandably, no one likes him.
 - a) **Some of you may have seen the movie that came out last year and was nominated for Best Picture, *The Big Short*.** That movie tells the story not only of the financial crisis that hit in 2008, but also of the guys who profited enormously from it, by noticing what was likely to go down, and so betting against the banks and the US Economy. **While thousands of people lost their financial stability, these guys made a killing. Nobody likes that.**
 - b) **On top of what he does for a living, Zacchaeus has physical challenges.** He's quite petite. He might have a lot of wealth and power but he's so short he can't even see Jesus because of his height. He has to climb a tree to look at him, physically reinforcing his social reality - **this guy is removed from broader Jewish social life.** He's hiding up in a tree, trying to get a glimpse of Jesus.
 - c) Jesus, surrounded by people who are much r more obvious choices for personal connection, not such misfits, and **this is the guy Jesus calls out to: the weird little prick up in the tree.** What's that about?
 - d) Here, like in many other places, Jesus seems to notice those who no one else notices. He notices those on the margins and he calls them out for connection.

IV. Jesus embraces Zacchaeus

- A. he includes him in a major way; **Culture where hospitality is central. To eat at his house expresses solidarity with him, he is aligning with Zacchaeus.** And Zacchaeus is thrilled. Immediately, brings him to his house with "great excitement and joy." No insecurity; he experiences Jesus' embrace, his acceptance of him and he can't wait to show Jesus his place. I imagine he breaks out his best wine. He's a rich man, so he's got considerable resources at his disposal. He sends his servants around in a flurry, preparing a feast, cause Zacchaeus is entertaining an important guest. He can throw a major party.
- B. **Not everyone thinks this is a party Jesus should be at.** All the people who know who Zacchaeus is and what he does are offended. How can Jesus align himself with this lowlife? But Jesus doesn't care. It's the same thing he's been doing over and over again; hanging out with tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers. He even called a tax collector to be one of his twelve disciples. Maybe Zacchaeus heard that; maybe that's why he wanted to see him in the first place. The point is **Jesus is willing to scandalize others to bring Zacchaeus to a place of belonging;** he doesn't really care what others think. In fact, he knows their impressions of who fits in are usually wrong.
 1. Just in the chapter before, just paragraphs before we hear of Jesus' trip to Jericho, Luke has Jesus sharing this parable.
 - a) Luke 18:9-14

9 Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own

righteousness and scorned everyone else: 10 “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! 12 I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’

13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ 14 I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

- b) **Jesus called it in regards to this guy and how people respond to him.** But he also knows those people are wrong, and the ones judging folks like him are in more danger than people like Zacchaeus because they’re so blind to their pride. They define themselves by how well they fit in with God and with god’s people, instead of by the confounding and awe inspiring reality that, even in their imperfection someone like Jesus sees them and accepts them.

V. Belonging with Jesus transforms Zacchaeus

- A. Zacchaeus changes his ways, but not because of some skillful sermonizing. A call to fit in cannot bring real, transforming change. What Zacchaeus experiences is the moving, awe inspiring reality, of being noticed, accepted, and embraced by Jesus, and invited, just as he is, tax collecting profession, short stature and all, to be Jesus friends. **Zacchaeus is moved by the beauty of belonging.** And once he experiences that, everything else feels unimportant. He has that experience that people have when they encounter awe - he’s grateful and he wants to give back to others. He vows to give back all that he has cheated folks out of, and way more than what is required by law, as restitution for stealing. He isn’t motivated by a sense of entitlement or even justice. He’s now motivated by love and grace, the same love and grace he’s experienced as a result of belonging with Jesus.

VI. There’s an interesting point of resonance that this story has with another story, much further back in the Biblical narrative. The tree that Zacchaeus climbs into is a sort of fig tree. Fig trees appear throughout the Bible, they were a common fruit tree in the ancient world.

- A. First place: **in the Fall account, Adam and Eve used fig leaves to hide themselves in shame because of their sin.** This was the beginning of their separation from God. They mess up, they know it, and then for the first time, they feel the need to hide from God.
- B. Here, **Jesus seems to be reversing the pattern.** He finds Zacchaeus hidden by fig leaves. This man that everyone judges for his “shameful, sinful lifestyle” is separated from all, once again by fig leaves. But Jesus sees him there and he calls to him. He invites him to come forward from his hiding place to be seen. **He calls him from a place of shame to a place of acceptance. From a place of isolation, to a place of belonging.**
- C. **Brene Brown is a research professor in Social Work,** and has done most of her work in the areas of vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. Became famous with her hit Ted Talk, “The Power of Vulnerability”, she talks about how our reluctance to be vulnerable is powerfully connected to our shame and our belief that we are unworthy. She talks about how we hate feeling vulnerable, and so we numb ourselves from having to feel those emotions of uncertainty. We numb them with spending. We numb them with food. We numb them with drink. But as she points out, **we can’t selectively numb the negative emotions.** We end up numbing the positive ones too. And so it becomes a vicious cycle. **Our fear that we will not experience the acceptance and love we long for causes us to hide behind fig leaves of addiction,** that then keep others at arms length so we cannot experience love and

acceptance. **We numb and we hide rather than risk being known as we truly are and possibly rejected.**

- D. **But to the child of God hiding in the tree, Jesus says, “come down.”** Strip off the fig leaves. Put down the coverings. Be who you are, be naked, be flawed, be messy. **And experience belonging.** Here, in your messiness. In your imperfection. In your sin. You don’t need to fit in. You simply need to let me come hang out with you. Because you belong. You are enough. **Brene Brown says, “worthiness has no prerequisites.”** Be here. Be seen. Be loved. Just as you are today, with that extra 10 pounds, that problem with porn, that credit card debt, that short temper with your kids: you are enough. And I want to celebrate belonging with you right now. I’m coming to your house for dinner.

VII. This is the bigger thing Jesus is doing with all of us. He’s calling us as a rag-tag band of misfits with our own challenges, our own addictions, our own bad habits, our own ways we don’t fit and inviting all of us to belong in the family of God.

- A. Nadia Bolz-Webber quote - **“...the thing that really cooked people's noodles wasn't the question "is Jesus like God" it was "what if God is like Jesus". What if God is not who we thought? What if the most reliable way to know God is not through religion, not through a sin and punishment program, but through a person. What if the most reliable way to know God is to look at how God chose to reveal God's self in Jesus?**

Because that changes everything. If what we see in Jesus is God's own self, revealed, then what we are dealing with here is a God who is ridiculously indiscriminate about choosing friends. A God who would rather die than be in the sin accounting business anymore. A God who would not lift a finger to condemn those who crucified him, but went to the depths of Hell rather than be apart even from his betrayers. A God unafraid to get his hands dirty for the ones he loves. This, this is the God who rises to new life with dirt still under his nails.”

- B. What if God is like Jesus. What if he just wants to be with us. To bring us out of shame and into belonging in His family. To let us experience the love of the Father. John puts it this way in 1 John 3, **“See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!”** What a beautiful amazing reality.

VIII. Transition to time of response. (Band and communion attendant can come forward.) A few questions to reflect on as we go into responsive worship, potentially receive prayer for. Consider whichever ones resonate for you:

- A. **If you’re truly honest, what are the reasons you might be tempted to believe you don’t “fit in” with God or spiritual community? What “fig leaves” are you using to cover places of shame in your life? What would it mean for you to experience Jesus calling you out of the tree and accepting you just as you are?**
- B. **Are you ever tempted to compare yourself to others, like the crowds who disapproved of Jesus’ choice of friends, or the Pharisee in his parable? Consider confessing your judgements to Jesus and asking him to free you of the burden of judging others and determining who “fits in” in his family.**
- C. **Do you have eyes to see those dwelling on the margins? Ask Jesus to help you identify the tax collectors of our time, and participate in his work of extending belonging to all, particularly the disempowered and marginalized.**