

#Sherry Turkle, MIT professor and author of *Alone Together*, has found in her research that people today report feeling, at the same time, more connected and lonelier than ever before. We crave affirmation and we want to fit in, but what we need is belonging. Brene Brown, in her book *Daring Greatly*, says belonging is much different than fitting in. Fitting in is a skill we learn in adolescence and keep practicing in adulthood—it is about changing yourself so as to be found acceptable to a group of peers. Belonging is being valued just as you are. Belonging is necessary to our living healthy and productive lives.

That's what baptism is about. In Jesus' baptism God says, "You are my beloved." These are words of belonging that create identity and worth. Words that empower Jesus to begin his public ministry and live out his mission. #Our baptisms empower us to do our mission/vocation. In baptism we are loved and claimed and that empowers us to go into the world to make it a better place. Baptism connects our faith and our daily lives. What God says to Jesus is true for us, we are "God's beloved," and that unconditional love sets us free to live and love.

Throughout Jesus' ministry he talks about and lives out what John the Baptist says to the crowds in today's reading—John cries out for justice. The soldiers want to know what that looks like so they ask, "How do we do justice?" John says, "Don't threaten people or extort money from them." The tax collectors want to know what a life of love and justice looks like so they ask. John says, "Don't collect more than you are supposed to." In both cases John describes faithfulness as being lived out in their vocation. Being loved unconditionally empowers

you to go in to the world and make it a better, more trustworthy place. The unconditional love and belong that is ours in Jesus Christ—that is gifted to us in baptism, empowers us to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

We often understand the word humility to mean having a low view of our abilities but what humility means here is having an accurate assessment of our abilities. God didn't create us to be small, the Bible says, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." We are God's beloved and we are sent into the world with power—the power to be out of the box. I got this book for Christmas, *#Leadership and Self-deception, getting out to the box*. Being inside the box means being curved inward, inside yourself—thinking of yourself as more important, viewing other people as objects. We often see power being used this way, but the power God gives us in our baptism, through being loved and claimed, the power that belonging gives is the power to be out of the box. Being "out of the box" means being open to others—seeing yourself and others as people, believing that all are worthy of love and respect.

The author tells two stories as examples... He was on a flight that had open seating. While boarding he overheard that the plane was not sold out but would have very few open seats. He felt lucky to find a window seat with an open seat next to it. Passengers still in need of seats continued streaming down the aisle, their eyes scanning and evaluating the desirability of their dwindling seating. The author goes on to say, "I set my briefcase on the vacant middle seat, took out that day's paper, and

started to read. I remember peering over the paper at the people who were coming down the aisle. At the sight of body language that said my briefcase's seat was being considered, I spread the paper wider, making the seat look as undesirable as possible." My question to you is was the author "in the box" closed and treating others as objects? Or was he out of the box treating all people as worthy of love and respect?

The second story: The author was flying with his wife and there was a mistake with the ticketing and they weren't seated together and the flight attendant was having a hard time finding them seats together. As they tried to figure it out a woman came up behind them from the rear of the plane, and said, "Excuse me—if you need two seats together, I believe the seat next to me is vacant. I'd be happy to sit in one of yours." What about this example—was the woman in the box or out? Was she treating others as objects or as worthy of love and respect?

#Our God given power, gifted to us in baptism, empowers us to see all people as worthy of love and respect. In baptism we are freed to do justice and love mercy. This is what is what Jesus' love does to us—belonging sets us free to love. Jesus love and forgiveness comes to us with no strings attached, nothing we do or don't do makes God love us, God says to us in our infancy, while we can't understand or say we believe, God says "you are my beloved." We baptize babies because the love and the claim and the call that is ours in baptism doesn't depend on us or our understanding or our faithfulness, it is all about God and God's faithfulness. That unconditional love that washes over us in our baptism, empowers us,

frees us, to see all people as worthy of love and respect. When we do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God—we open ourselves to others and we are out of the box. We continue to learn and grow, heal and forgive—realizing faith is an experience and a journey...not a destination.

#What does it look like to live out of the box? That is the question that the people asked John the Baptist and John says, "If you have two coats give one away." I don't have two coats. I have one, two, three, four, and my raincoat, that's five. I often wear my vest as a coat, six, I have two vest, so seven. John the Baptist is talking to us and imploring us to action. Faithfulness, doing justice and loving mercy are closely connected to generosity and giving our money away. Why is that? In Martin Luther's explanation to the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods," he says, "the number one thing that keeps us from loving God above all else is money." What do we fear, love and trust? Money. The life of faith is a life of generosity. Our faith needs to give.

#Even when we have a hard time giving or loving ourselves or loving others we remember God's faithfulness—the energy it takes to get out of the box is given to us by God, our giving and our loving comes from God. As we struggle to give and as we struggle to love, we take a deep breath—breathing in God and God's love and mercy. God is a close to us as our very breath. God is always with us, will always love us—we belong. And that love empowers us to love others—to get out of our box and see all people as worth of love and respect. Amen.