

DRAWING THE CIRCLE WIDE¹

Matthew 15: 21-28

Acts 10: 9-15

Galatians 3: 23-29

We are concluding this retreat with a time of worship. We have rightly spent significant time learning and discussing, but the culmination of this retreat is worship.

I

We are guided in this time of worship by three related scriptures. All three of them have to do with the struggle about inclusion. I don't think we realize how much of a struggle it was for the early church to come to an agreement about how wide to draw the circle of inclusion. At the beginning of the Christian movement most of the members came out of a very exclusivist Jewish tradition.

We see it clearly in the story of the Canaanite woman (a Gentile) who comes to Jesus asking him to heal her daughter. At first we hear a very exclusivist answer: *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. My circle, in other words, is narrow; you are not in that circle; go away. Then, when the Canaanite woman begs for help, we get an answer from Jesus that makes us cringe: *It is not fair to take the*

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children's food and throw it to the dogs. I think it is safe to say that at that moment this woman would not be singing, "What a friend we have in Jesus!"

Over the years I have both heard and read the many attempts to make Jesus look good in this story. Was he just tired? Was he frustrated? Was he testing her faith? All of those answers have been given, but the bottom line is that her persistent faith inspired him to redraw the circle so that it included a person of faith that he had always been taught in the synagogue was "the other." By the end of the story he was no longer saying, "Go away and leave me alone." He was marveling over her faith!

The second scripture we read today moves us further along to the time when the early church was struggling with how wide to draw the circle of inclusion. The story of Peter's vision must have taken the breath away from those members of the church who had been raised in a traditional Jewish household. Like all good Jewish children, he had been raised with the words of the Torah ringing in his ears: *I am the Lord your God; I have separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animals and the unclean.*² This

² Leviticus 20: 24b-25.

distinction of eating only kosher foods is always linked to separation from the Gentiles.

This commandment was reinforced by Jewish children's bedtime stories. While most of us grew up hearing bedtime stories like the Mother Goose rhymes, in Peter's time little Jewish boys and girls heard stories like the one about the seven brothers who endure tortures for refusing to eat non-kosher food. In the story, the mother of the seven brothers bravely watches her sons die, encouraging them to remain faithful to God even in the face of torture. That kind of story, which all Jewish children would know, was deeply imbedded in their consciousness. It served to draw the circle around them and them alone. It had been drilled into them from childhood that God loves a tight-knit, exclusivist circle.

The third scripture we have heard today comes from the Apostle Paul, who affirms the breaking down of divisions by stating that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male or female, slave or free. There is what he calls a *new humanity*. This is an act of drawing the circle wider than many in the early church were ready to draw it.

But have you noticed that in every scripture we read, growth came from drawing the circle wider than they had before? At first it was a circle around Jews in the synagogue who were devoted to Jesus. Then we can see from the records that Paul and others found Gentiles who were devoted to the way of Jesus. What should they do? They drew the circle wider. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.

What about slaves? The little New Testament book that we call Philemon is really a one-page letter to a slave owner whose slave has become devoted to the way of Christ. Paul is writing Philemon about his slave, whose name is Onesimus, and Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus is no longer a slave, but a beloved brother!³ And in doing so he rang a death knell for slavery in the 1st century, the 19th century, as well as contemporary slavery. For Christians, there is no more slave or free, for all are one in Christ Jesus. He drew the circle wide!

What about women? The earliest Christians just assumed that women were second-class citizens in the church. That was their upbringing in the Jewish faith, where women were not even allowed to enter the most sacred areas of the temple. The circle was drawn tightly

³ Philemon, verse 16.

around only men in leadership of the church. But then Paul heard what we know as “the Macedonian call”—a vision of a man in Macedonia calling for Paul to come. But when he went to Macedonia, he did not find a man; he found a faithful woman who led a church in her own home! Lydia became the first of a long train of women leading the church.⁴ Paul had to re-think his bias against women, and he drew the circle wide. There is no long male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus!

III

All through the history of the church there has been pressure to draw the circle tighter! When our church was founded in 1812, Baptists were a persecuted minority, huddling together in small bands. Baptism by immersion was a common experience that set them apart. In rejecting infant baptism, they drew the circle tightly around a small group of people. Somewhere along the way, this church decided to draw the circle wider and declare that believers’ baptism and infant baptism have their own beautiful symbolism, and the important thing is not how much water you use, but how serious you are in following the way of Christ. The circle was drawn wider.

⁴ Acts 16: 9-15.

Over the protests of many fellow Baptists, this church made a courageous decision to draw the circle wider and include people of any sexual orientation. This infuriated some fellow Baptists who were convinced that the circle had to be tightly drawn around only Christians of heterosexual orientation. Our local association tried to draw the circle of inclusion in the association so tightly that it would not include us. It failed by one vote. We still insisted that we draw the circle wide.

The poet Edwin Markham wrote a little poem called "Outwitted."
It only has four lines:

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

IV

Fred Craddock, who is a popular speaker and accomplished storyteller, tells about a time when he found himself stuck in Winnipeg during a snow storm. Everything was shut down, and his host could not even get to the hotel to pick him up for breakfast. The only place he could find for breakfast was a bus depot café about two blocks from his hotel.

When he entered the café, he found it crowded, and somebody had to scoot over and let him into a booth. A big man with a greasy apron came over to the table and asked him what he wanted. Fred asked for a menu, but the waiter said, "All we have is soup." "Then I'll have soup," said Fred. The man brought the soup, and Fred said that it did not look very appetizing. It was gray, the color of a mouse. He tasted it, and it tasted awful. So he sat there feeling sorry for himself.

Then the door opened and someone yelled, "Close the door!" A middle-aged woman came in. She had no coat and nothing on covering her head. Someone scooted over to make room for her in a booth. The big man in the greasy apron came over and the whole café heard this conversation. "What d'ya want?" "Bring me a glass of water," the woman said. The waiter brought the water, took out his tablet, and repeated, "What d'ya want?" "Just the water," she said. "Look, Lady, you gotta order something. I've got paying customers who need a seat. Just order!"

She insisted that she only wanted water. "You gotta order something or get out!" he said. "Can I stay here and get warm?" she asked. "Order or get out." So she got up, and when she did, the people

at the table where she was sitting got up. People all around the café got up. Fred got up, and they all started moving towards the door.

When the waiter saw what was happening, he said, "OK, she can stay." And everybody sat down. He even brought her a bowl of soup. Fred asked the man sitting next to him, "Who is she?" "I never saw her before," he said, "but if she ain't welcome, ain't nobody welcome."

Fred said that all he could hear was the sound of people eating soup. Fred ate his soup, and he said that it tasted good this time. He said, "It was strange. I remembered eating something that tasted like that soup before. And as I left the café, I remembered what it was. That soup tasted that day like bread and wine.

That is what happens when you draw the circle wide.