

EXPANDING THE CIRCLE

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The minister was leading a retreat for the church council and administrative leaders when she asked, “Can I have eight volunteers come to the front and form a circle?”

After the circle had been formed, she commented, “Why is it that when we are asked to form a circle we always look inward, at one another?”

What would happen if the circles we formed looked outward, toward the people who are not part of our circle?”

“Our circles would grow!” one leader replied. “Our church would not remain the same!” another person answered. “Why would we want to change?” another person queried. Needless to say, this retreat started with an intense discussion about the role and mission of the church.

Which way do we choose to draw our circles? Do the circle we draw with our families, our work places, and our communities reflect our desire to be open? Do we draw them in ways that preserve what we hold dear and exclude that which threatens? In so many respects it seems natural for us to do the latter. After all, isn’t that what families are for? Aren’t we first and foremost called to look out for ourselves and the members of the groups to which we belong? After all, that’s why we join groups, isn’t it? We are looking for safety. We are looking for people who share things in common with us. We look to those who are like us for support and encouragement.

Yet, all too often we use our circles of familiarity to exclude – to keep us from venturing into areas where we might expand, learn, and contribute. It happens in churches, and it happens in communities as well. In rural areas, the folk in one town might look down the road and say, “Thank God we live here and not there.” Rural folks compare their way of life to life in the cities and say, “Thank God, we live here. This is a place where our kids will be safe and we don’t have to worry about gangs and about drugs.” City people do the same thing with people in rural areas.

Today we heard a familiar story about the parable of the prodigal son. The story begins with the Pharisees who complain, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” The circle of the scribes and Pharisees was in exclusive circle. Only those who obeyed the law perfectly were included. Within this circle, members would constantly thank God that their circle was unique and different. Throughout scripture, Jesus’ encounters with these two groups reinforce that point. The Pharisees used not only the law but their interpretation of the law; to make sure that people who were dissimilar – people they named as sinners – would never be included within the reinforced boundary of their circle.

In response to their stubborn resistance to welcoming those who were different or who failed to measure up to their standards, Jesus tells this story of the prodigal son or

the waiting father. The importance of the story is not only that the wandering son comes to his senses and returns to the good graces of his father; rather the story itself is told in contrast to the older son who believes that his brother should be excluded from the circle of his father's family. In the end, the father reassures this resistant, defensive older son that his property has always belonged to this older son. The return of his younger brother does nothing to change the love that this father has for both his sons.

How do we draw the circles of our communities, our families and our churches? Even as we ask that questions, we need to acknowledge that through the life, death and new life of Jesus, we know a patient and loving God, God who is ever willing to expand the circle of the family to include all people. Such is the power of God's grace.

Rather than make rules and regulations to exclude, grace brings us the love of the eternal God. In every respect the words that the father says about this prodigal are words God might say about us, "But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found. (v.32)

As we realize the generous power of God's grace and the impact that has upon our lives, this news should help us celebrate our lives with joy and thanksgiving. I believe we have witnessed God's grace and the power and the impact it has upon us through the celebration of baptism with Josh and his family. We will continue to experience that power and grace as we witness Derek, Anna, Amy reaffirm publicly the faith proclaimed in their baptism, and as we witness Orville's initiation into the body of Christ through profession of faith and baptism. We will experience that power and grace as we welcome new members to this community of faith. It is my hope and prayer that our circle is outward and that they will all feel welcome in this community of faith and that we can all work together to serve as a gift of God's grace and that we are challenged to draw circles that include. May we always be open to expanding our circles of hospitality so that all people we touch might know the touch of God's wonderful, welcoming, inclusive grace.