

Draw the Circle Wide

Revelation 21: 1-6

Acts 11: 1-18

June 13, 2010 - UM

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

Draw the Circle Wide is the name of a hymn that speaks of God's all encompassing love... and our challenge and task to include all of God's people in community.

The chorus is:

Draw the circle wide
Draw it wider still
Let this be our song, no one stands alone
Standing side by side,
Draw the circle wide.

This is certainly a task that the United Church has been wrestling with for a number of years...

From the decision in 1988 to remove the question about sexual orientation from the process towards ordination... to our role in ministries with people who are very different from us... to the Emerging Spirit Campaign that seeks to make connections with those outside the church.

And we might think it is a new trend... this effort to draw the circle wide...

But, as we can tell from the passage from Acts that I just read, this is not a new issue.

The early church, a community of Jews, struggled with those very things.

Who is part of the realm of God?

Can a gentile become a Christian without first becoming a Jew?

In other words, the question for them was: Is a gentile, without changing externally in anyway, welcome into the community of followers of Jesus Christ?

In the reading from Acts, Peter is being challenged by other Jews about eating with gentiles, the uncircumcised.

And in response he tells of a dream he had in which a sheet lowers with all kinds of animals... all the ones that are part of the Jewish dietary laws and also ones that are not.

And God says, "Get up Peter, kill and eat."

You see for observant Jews, not eating particular foods was not only part of their religious practice, but also of their identity, and they considered some animals unclean.

To eat of an unclean animal made you ritually unclean and unable to worship in the temple until you had undergone a ritual of purification.

And even those that they considered fit for consumption had to be killed in a particular way... by a priest.

To hear God command him to kill and eat particular animals went against all that Peter had been taught.

But God pronounces all the animals good...

And Peter listens to God's voice.

Peter's defence to the authorities is that God's voice and Spirit take precedence over the rules by which the Jews have lived.

And he is a witness to the Holy Spirit descending on those whom he would have previously shunned.

I think we find it challenging to understand how radical that vision was... so listen to this modern interpretation...

A sheet lowers from the clouds, as a modern day Peter dozes in the shade on a hot summer's day.

Because he knows his New Testament, he expects animals, but, instead of animals, there are people.

One is still wearing his prison greens... another is in black leather, with a string of ear-rings, and colourful tattoos on both shoulders...

Two guys are holding hands, but kneeling in prayer... two girls are also kneeling, but they seem to be focused on each other, as if in a wedding service.

There is a man in rags, who has obviously not shaved or bathed for a week... there is a woman with AIDS... there are children who work in the sex trade against their will...

There is the woman next door whose cries you ignore on Saturday nights...

There are people of every colour and culture, and Peter is amazed because he knows that some of them bear deep hatred for each other.

And Peter complains: "Lord, where are the animals I am supposed to eat? I am ready for that, because we eat so much and such variety today."

There is a voice: This is not about eating, Peter: these are your neighbours you are to love, welcome and serve.

But, Lord, how can I? Some of them are plain scary, and others are going to fight as soon as the sheet touches the ground.

That's not the point, Peter.

They may well present problems, and you may have to work hard to help them sort themselves out...

What counts for now is that you realize that these are all of my children... and I love them...

Just as Jesus was my child... and I loved him...

Do you remember what he said just before he left you?

He said, "I give you a new commandment... that you love each other as I have loved you..."

And then Peter awoke... filled with trepidation and commitment...

Love can be hard work... drawing the circle wide can be hard work... and Peter knew this...

He knew that the love Jesus had called him and others and continues to call us isn't just the warm and fuzzy love... but for love that hangs in... the love that love's neighbour as self.

And without God's presence, Jesus' example and the Holy Spirit energizing us, it would be impossible and live draining work...

Peter felt the tension of living between accordance with the Torah and listening to God's voice.

I suggest is the tension in which we still live.

Who is welcome to be part of a faith community and who is not?

As you know, we are in the midst of some visioning.

Trying to discern what it means to be a community of faith in this time.

At our Session meeting on Monday, someone asked if we were going to have to do what our church consultant recommends.

My question is: Why wouldn't we do what she recommends?

Her recommendations are coming out of the processes in which we have engaged.

She is taking all the input that we gave her in the various sessions and will pull together her report from that.

She is not going to recommend things that are divorced from our unique history and context, but rather things that arose out of the conversations those of us who participated in the process.

As I mentioned last week, at the end of our last session, we, not our church consultant, we, named 5 things that we are going to focus on over the next 3-5 years:

- Being a vibrant, open, inclusive community of faith that practices extravagant hospitality.
- Develop a presence as a place of historical interest
- Explore efficiencies in building use and design.
- Develop communication paths, both electronic and personal.
- Develop ministry with young families and youth.

At the Visioning Team meeting on Wednesday, we toyed with a new vision statement and I invite you to ponder this possibility:

United Memorial is seeking to be an open, inclusive community of faith which offers Jesus' love, hope and new life.

Ponder that over the summer: United Memorial is seeking to be an open, inclusive community of faith which offers Jesus' love, hope and new life

Does that sound like us?

Does that sounds like what we want to become?

Does that sound like what God might have in mind for us?

Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, experts in church renewal and transformation, say the most important questions for a congregation to ask themselves are:

Who are we?

What assets do we have?

What is God calling us to do?

Who is our neighbour?

Simple yet complex questions...

And different answers for each faith community.

And the questions may lead us to unexpected places of uncertainty... but also unexpected places of grace and abundance.

As it is written in Revelation, "See, I am making all things new."

God is always calling us into the future... into a new heaven and a new earth...

And I trust that God is with all the communities of faith... guiding us... inspiring us... leading us into God's shalom.

In closing, here are words from contemporary Christian song by Jewel entitled Hands.

My hands are small, I know,
but they're not yours they are my own
but they're not yours they are my own
and I am never broken
In the end only kindness matters
In the end only kindness matters

Thanks be to God for vision, dreams, love and kindness, amen.

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Peter's modern vision adapted from personal correspondence with Stew Clarke.