

“Drawing Circles”

Luke 5:27-32; 7:36; 14:1; 15:1-2; 19:1-7

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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Two decades have passed since the series finale of one of my favorite television shows, “The Wonder Years.” Perhaps you remember it fondly, as I do. I suppose one of the reasons I found this program so delightful is that it accurately captured what it was like to be a teenager in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The weekly predicaments in which Kevin, Paul, and Winnie found themselves always brought back a flood of memories. For example, there is that touching scene on Kevin’s first day of high school. He has just emerged from the serving line at the cafeteria and stands holding his tray of food as the voice-over of his adult memory recalls that crucial moment of decision: Where should he sit? To his right are the tables where the jocks and cheerleaders eat. To his left the musicians and artists congregate. Over in the corner sit the rough crowd clad in black leather jackets, and over by the water fountain are the nerds, shirt pockets bulging with protractors and compasses and pens. Kevin perceives that his entire high school career is hanging in the balance, for he will be forever branded by this solitary decision!

Of course, Kevin overestimated the significance of a single meal, but he had come face-to-face with the social reality of *exclusive fellowship*. Membership in Group A precludes you from associating with people in Group B; indeed, if you were to associate with the people in Group B, you would risk expulsion from Group A.

Things were no better in Jesus’ day; if anything, the situation was worse. The barriers between insiders and outsiders were extremely rigid: Jew vs. Gentile; Pharisee vs. the common Jew; male vs. female. But as the scripture lesson for today reveals, Jesus had the shocking habit of ignoring the social barriers that had been so carefully erected by the practitioners of exclusive fellowship. Each of these brief passages portrays Jesus sharing a meal with someone. That he would dine with devout Pharisees one day and despicable tax collectors and other social outcasts the next is noteworthy, especially given the symbolic significance of meals in Jesus’ day.

In ancient Mediterranean cultures, “the microcosm of the meal [was] parallel to the macrocosm of everyday social relations.”¹ That is, people sharing a meal were expected to share a common set of ideas and values as well as to occupy a similar social position. That is, meals presupposed the existence of an exclusive fellowship. If the table were not exclusive, you would run the risk of social and religious “pollution” from associating with the wrong sort of people. And if that occurred, you would have to undergo an elaborate ritual of purification before you could associate with the members of your own group in worship and fellowship. That is why the Pharisees were shocked that Jesus, a devout teacher, would eat with irreligious tax collectors and other sinners.

No matter what historical period or culture you choose to examine, you find that people tend to establish exclusive fellowships: self-righteous religious groups, snobby social clubs, violent street gangs, high school cliques. Why is this so? Social scientists and psychologists have coined a marvelous word to describe the underlying cause of this behavior: *xenophobia*. This interesting term is derived from two Greek words: *phobos*, which means “fear,” and *xenos*, a word meaning “strange” or “foreign.” Thus, xenophobia is the fear of anything strange or foreign.

Everyone experiences this fear to some extent. Do you remember the anxiety you felt about going to school for the first time? Or moving to a new city? Or the first day on a new job? Or the moment you realized you had taken a wrong turn and were lost? Or finding yourself in a social situation where you knew no one? Just as the “Peanuts” comic strip character Linus longs for his security blanket when it is taken away from him, there are times when you find yourself longing for the comfort of the familiar. The foreign can be pretty scary.

Unfortunately, fear of that which is strange frequently manifests itself in prejudice, even hatred. We are well-acquainted with the way these ugly emotions manifest themselves in racism, but that is only one of the ways xenophobia can result in exclusive fellowships. Unless we deal with our fear of what is strange or foreign to us, we will find ourselves forever drawing small circles around us — circles that include people who are like us but exclude all those who are different.

The smaller we draw the circle the more uniformity we achieve within it. Because the people forming an exclusive fellowship occupy much the same social position, hold much the same values, and in general think alike, there will be little conflict. Everything within the small circle will be familiar, predictable, comfortable. But the downside is that small circles are also constricting. Just as a plant must be transplanted to ever-larger pots if it is to continue growing, so too, we must expand the circles we have drawn around us if we are to grow spiritually.

I grew up in the Oklahoma Panhandle where the land is very flat. One of my earliest childhood memories is standing in the middle of a freshly plowed field and slowly turning around in a circle. I could see the horizon all around me as if the sky were a light blue bowl turned upside down on a flat earth. I thought I was seeing the ends of the earth. The whole world was within my purview — and it centered on me!

Soon after that event, my family took a trip to New Mexico. I remember looking out the car window and suddenly seeing the Rocky Mountains rising majestically out of the plain. I was amazed! I had not seen them that day as I stood in the field. Somehow they had been outside the circle formed by the horizon I saw in the field. In that moment, I realized that my circle was too small, that it excluded far more than it included.

That’s the problem with small circles. Living within their confines is impoverishing. So much of reality is excluded. But the larger we draw the circle, the more diversity we include within it. Diversity can produce tension, that is true; but diversity also enlarges our perspective.

As we come to see a bigger picture, we discover that our lives are enriched. We come to appreciate diversity rather than fear it.

In the midst of a culture that was based on a rigid application of exclusive fellowship, Jesus sought to create an *inclusive fellowship*. An inclusive fellowship requires an inclusive table where all are welcome — not just devout Pharisees, but tax collectors and other social outcasts as well, even Gentiles. All may experience God’s forgiveness and love. Jesus envisioned people coming from east and west and south and north to sit at the table (Luke 13:29), and his invitation to this inclusive fellowship still stands.

A century ago Disciples poet Edwin Markham captured the inclusive spirit of Jesus in a short poem entitled “Outwitted.”

He drew a circle that shut me out!—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win
And we drew a circle that took him in!²

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 367.

² *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis: Chalice Press 1995) 551.