

**PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
The Rev. John Tamilio III, Senior Minister**

**Pentecost XVI — Sunday, September 6, 2009
Sermon: “Redrawing the Circle”**

**Gospel Lesson: Matthew 15:21-28
Epistle Lesson: Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Hebrew Bible Lesson: Genesis 45:1-15**

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I

Boston comedian Emo Phillips once said, “I find it sad that so many people hate others because of their race, or nationality, or creed...when there are so many really *good* reasons to hate other people.” Phillips’ tongue-in-cheek quip shines a great deal of light on our social, political, and religious reality: more often than not, we do not treat others as a “thou,” as Martin Buber suggested, but as an “it.” We spend an exorbitant amount of time building walls instead of bridges, of drawing boundaries that segregate us into safe places where we can be with those who look like us, talk like us, think like us, and act like us. We separate ourselves into nations, into religions, into clubs and cliques. By no means am I suggesting that we separate ourselves because we hate one another. I’m a social observer, not a sociologist. Some parameters *are* rooted in hate. Some are not. That’s not the point. The point is simple: we are a people, we are a world, divided. All three of today’s scripture readings address and offer a remedy for this.

II

I am troubled each time I read this Gospel passage. Why? Frankly, and with all due reverence and respect, Jesus comes across as a jerk in this story.

A Canaanite woman (a Gentile) comes to Jesus asking him to heal her daughter, who is “tormented by a demon.” Jesus’ response is harsh. At first he says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” In other words, I came to call to repentance Jews who have strayed from the covenant, not everyone else (the Gentile world). Then, when the Canaanite woman pleads for help, Jesus says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Doesn’t sound like the warm, loving, cozy Jesus that we’re used to, does it?

There are numerous interpretations which try to answer why Jesus behaves this way. Maybe he was tired? Maybe he was frustrated? Maybe he was testing the faith of the Canaanite woman? Who knows? What we do know, however, is that her response not only challenges Jesus; it brings about a dramatic change in his words and his actions. Jesus is moved to heal the Canaanite woman's daughter. More importantly, though, Jesus redraws the circle of the covenant so that it includes someone who is outside the circle. His ministry becomes wider to include "the other." Is this not what Paul is speaking about in today's Epistle Lesson?

III

Paul is an interesting figure. Before his conversion to Christianity after his Road to Damascus experience, he was a Jew who persecuted Christians. One would think that his conversion would possibly have the opposite effect: that he would be an Anti-Semite who excluded the Jews from the new covenant in Christ. There are some passages in Paul's letters and some Pauline scholars who suggest that this is the case. Today's Epistle Lesson, however, paints a totally different picture of our friend.

After talking about salvation in Christ in chapter ten, Paul begins the 11th chapter of his Letter to the Romans with a question: "I ask, then, has God rejected his people?" In other words, does God's acceptance of the Gentile world through Christ necessitate a rejection of the Jews? Many Christians think it does. They think that only Christians are saved. Paul's answer is different. He says, "By no means... God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew." Why? Because, as Paul tells us, "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."

Interesting! God's grace cannot be rescinded. When God established the covenant with Israel, God essentially drew a circle that encompassed the Jewish people. Through Jesus, God did not draw a separate circle. Rather, God redrew the original circle so that it would be wider, so that it would be large enough to encompass Jew and Gentile alike.

IV

And then we have a Hebrew Bible Lesson that brings us to the end of the Joseph story. What does this have to do with redrawn circles and covenants? Well, we need to read this part of Joseph's story in-light of his entire narrative.

Joseph's brothers were jealous of him. This was a *huge* case of sibling rivalry. Joseph told them about some strange dreams he was having — dreams which indicated that he would be the master over his eleven brothers. They weren't pleased, so they planned on killing Joseph. After throwing him into a pit, they decided to sell him to

some passing travelers who brought Joseph to Egypt. You may recall how the rest of the story goes: after being falsely accused of having an affair with the wife of one of Pharaoh's officers, Joseph is imprisoned. He gains favor with Pharaoh by interpreting his dreams of a coming famine: Egypt will suffer seven years of hunger after seven years of prosperity. Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of all the land. He makes preparations which save the Egyptians from the famine: grain is stored during the seven years of prosperity and sold to Egyptian and foreigner alike during the famine. *Now this is when things get good.* This is when Joseph has the opportunity to seek revenge. His brothers come to Egypt seeking to buy grain. He's got them right where *any* brother would want them! (I have two older brothers. There were so many times in my childhood when I would have given a limb to be in the position that Joseph was in, but that's a sermon for another time.)

Joseph does take advantage of the situation. Read Genesis chapters 42 to 44 if you want to see brotherly vengeance in action. (It's almost as good as itching powder in a brother's bed, but, as I said, that's a sermon for another time.)

Joseph's heart softens, though. The love he has for his brothers moves him to tears and, as a result, he reveals his true identity to them. It is one of the best stories of forgiveness in all of The Bible. "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt," Joseph says. The brothers embrace and make amends.

The circle is drawn bigger. Even though they are his flesh and blood, Joseph's brothers are (essentially) his enemies. They tried to kill him and sold him into slavery. He has every right, according to ancient law, to seek revenge, but he chooses not to. He toys with them a little, yes, but he ends up redrawing the circle that encases him, and his new-found power and wealth, so that it will become wider, so that it will include his estranged brothers.

V

And so, what do these three diverse stories offer us? They offer us a challenge: a challenge to draw the circles in our lives wider. Whether it is as individuals, as church communities, or as nations, these passages challenge us to expand our vision and the boundaries that surround us to include those on the outside.

There are various ways that this can happen. One way, which Pilgrim is no stranger to, is to continue to open our doors to include those who have typically been ostracized from the church. One of the slogans that is part of the United Church of Christ's Still Speaking campaign says it best: "Our doors open EXTRA WIDE. After all, Jesus was a carpenter." This is the lesson the Canaanite woman teaches us. But

there is another way, one that we typically don't think about. We can learn from Joseph in this department.

It is incredibly difficult for us to accept those with whom we disagree. Think of our last example, think of those who *do* the ostracizing. Is our circle wide enough to accept them? Do we draw circles large enough to enable ourselves to love our enemies? I, for one, have used the bully pulpit numerous times to criticize those who hold more conservative and fundamentalist views. Those who preach that if you do not accept Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, you will burn in the fires of Hell. Those who preach that those who do not subscribe 100% to their exclusivist doctrines are not real Christians. Those who preach that those in the LGBT community are sinners. Those who preach that strict biblical literalism should set the tone for public policy and educational curricula. *These are not my favorite people in the world.* Not only do I have a hard time getting along with such folks; I often find it my duty to refute just about everything they say. And although part of my job as a pastor who holds more inclusivist views *may be* to contribute to the public discourse so that people know that the fundamentalists do not define all the terms, maybe another part of my job, as a pastor, is to redraw the tight circles that they draw, so that all of us are included. Maybe this is what we are all called to do.

By no means is this easy. It may be one of the hardest jobs in the world, but isn't this what grace is all about? Isn't this the assurance we have knowing that God is with us always to help us do what we think is impossible? With love, the love of God actively at work in our lives, we can redraw the restrictive circles that we, and others, draw.

All this can be summed up best by the Disciples of Christ poet Edwin W. Markham. In a hymn entitled "Outwitted," Markham writes,

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!¹

Maybe we can work with love — the love of God — to redraw all the circles in our lives so that they will include friend, and foe, and even us. Amen.

¹ Edwin W. Markham, "Outwitted" from the *Chalice Hymnal*, #551.