

‘Tis a Gift to be Simple: Draw a Simple Circle

Luke 10: 1-10

September 21, 2008

GR FUMC

“Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it.” When you enter Jericho now, you had better have your passport. In the patchwork of political geography that defines Jesus’ homeland these days, the city of Jericho is part of a small area controlled by the Palestinian government, surrounded by a larger, more populated area controlled by the Israeli government. Tourists traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, such as a group of us from First Church did last June, start from a place of bustling economy and first world amenities, move through an armed checkpoint bristling with machine guns, and end up in a place of desperate poverty and palpable anger.

The contrast between the two worlds of Jerusalem and Jericho symbolizes the current state of violent hostility that exists in that part of the world. The complex effects of cultural, racial and religious differences, the sinful, universal human desire to exact revenge from those who have hurt you, the echoing consequences of the post-WW II division of Palestine that created the modern nation of Israel, and now an enormous concrete-and-barbed-wire wall divide Israelis and Palestinians, all of whom claim this tiny plot of land on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean as their birthright.

I could not help but compare what I saw as we traveled between Israel and Palestine to the old photos I’ve seen of the Jim Crow South in the 1950s and 60s: a clean, modern, well-cared-for drinking fountain with a sign above it reading “White Only” next to an old, dilapidated, dirty drinking fountain under a sign that says “Colored Only.”

The Haves and the Have-Nots. Us and Them. Humanity has, over the millennia of

our existence, always found a way to carve circles of exclusion into our own lives and communities, usually to the advantage of those who already have and the disadvantage of those who have not.

There was no military checkpoint through which Jesus had to travel when he passed through Jericho. But the division of people into “us” and “them,” “good” and “evil” was just as real.

Zacchaeus was the chief tax-collector, a godfather in the Roman toll-taking mafia, a traitor to his people, a powerful, filthy-rich parasite. One of *them*, the *enemy*. But his position and wealth apparently carried little clout with the crowd that flocked to see Jesus, because they would not even clear away to give him a look. “Breaking all cultural taboos, Zacchaeus runs ahead of the crowd and scampers up a sycamore tree – most likely accompanied by hoots and jeers – and positions himself where he can see Jesus.”

(Donahue) These days, it would be like seeing a corporate executive shinnying up a telephone pole.” (Duke)

Before Zacchaeus can utter a word, before he repents of his greed or asks for forgiveness, Jesus looks up and says, “Come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.” Zacchaeus jumps out of the tree, goes home and happily receives Jesus. But not everyone is so happy. The crowd begins “to grumble,” the same term and the same complaint voiced by the scribes and Pharisees when Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. (Donahue) “What’s he doing? We stand in line for hours to see him and now he’s going off with that...that...tax collector?”

Some people are just plain unacceptable. You know? They just don’t deserve to live and eat and work and play along with the rest of us good folk.

One of these "unacceptable" people was a convicted sex offender who was released from prison in the summer of 1998. Rev. John Jewell reported that "the man tried to move into a suburban Los Angeles neighborhood where his presence was made known to the residents. A CNN reporter spoke with some of those residents who were demonstrating against the man's proximity. They made it clear. It didn't matter whether the man had served his time or not -- they wanted him gone. Can you blame them?"

'Where will he go?' the reporter asked one protester. *'He can burn in hell for all I care!'* The man replied.

Imagine that Jesus showed up at that demonstration and shouted to the man who remained behind closed doors, *'Come with me sir. Let us have dinner together this evening.'*

Wouldn't you be shocked?"

Human beings have always sorted themselves into separate circles. Long before the good Jews of Jericho circled their wagons to keep Zacchaeus out, Cain, the hunter was murdering his brother Abel, the farmer; the Egyptians were enslaving the Hebrews; and the Israelites were shunning the Samaritans.

It comes so naturally that it's really pretty simple. Draw a circle. We're in, they're out. Love your friends, hate your enemies. Anyone who is not with us is against us.

It's an age-old human trait, but in the last three decades or so, Americans have been putting a new spin on it. At his lecture at St. Mark's Church a couple of weeks ago, Dr. Martin Marty talked about how Americans don't talk to each other anymore about the political issues over which they disagree. It's not that we used to agree more, it's that we used to know more people with whom we disagreed. Yes, we have always drawn circles. But now the lines defining those circles have become so thick and impervious that we can't

imagine how anyone on the outside could possibly be a decent person.

The book that Marty cited as he made this point is called *The Big Sort*, by Bill Bishop. The author has been hitting the interview circuits recently, so the first two bookstores I tried were actually out of copies. But I found it on the third try and the hunt was well worth it. Full of statistics and studies to back his argument up, Bishop's theory is that "as Americans have moved over the past three [highly-mobile] decades, they have clustered in communities of sameness, among people with similar ways of life, beliefs, and, in the end, politics. Americans are forming tribes. Churches, clubs, civic organizations and volunteer groups are "filled with people who look alike and, more important, think alike." (5-6)

Little, if any, of this migration [is] by design, Bishop says. It's not a conscious effort by people to live among like-thinking neighbors. [But] "as people move to take jobs, to be close to family, or to follow the sun...they make choices about who their neighbors will be and who will share their new lives. (5)

So, for instance, "in the 1976 election between President Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, just over 26% of the nation's voters live in landslide counties," counties where one party won by 20 percentage points or more. "But by 2004 in one of the closest presidential elections in history, more than 48% of voters lived in landslide communities, communities where the election wasn't close at all." (9-10)

Bishop's extensive research demonstrates that "most of America [has been] engaged in a thirty-year movement toward more homogeneous ways of living." In a period of "unprecedented choice about where and how they wanted to live, [with] incredible physical and economic mobility" we have used those freedoms to increase segregation, not lessen it

(10-11).

Much of *The Big Sort* is about politics and geography. Bishop proves what we all have an intuitive cultural “sense” of anyway: Seattle is a blue circle, Houston is a red one. Boston is....(congregation: Blue!) Salt Lake City is....(congregation: Red!) Detroit is....(congregation: Blue!) Ada is....(congregation: Red!) But what about our churches? What role do *we* have to play in the segregation of our society into like-minded clusters?

Well, if our neighborhoods have become more culturally segregated since the mid-1970s, our churches are even more so. Some of this is because we prefer to worship in like-minded congregations. But we have also grown more homogenous because,” in the effort to counteract church decline and ‘grow’ their congregations, ministers actually encourage segregation by using techniques that create “group cohesion through like-mindedness.”

(Bishop, 159)

The church growth movement that began in the late 70s and bloomed in the 80s, taught ministers around the country that they should design their churches “for a culturally-defined ‘homogenous unit.’” Church growth gurus studied the Bible, but they also studied the census. They conducted market research. They noted the kinds of music people listened to and the kinds of clothes they wore. They designed their churches to appeal to targeted groups, demographic types. People wouldn’t be attracted to a church filled with a diverse membership.... But they would come to a church custom-built for people like themselves. (Bishop, 170-1)

One of the best known of these churches is Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church, recent host to a debate between the two presidential candidates. The account of how Warren founded Saddleback is now part megachurch lore. He chose the location after

identifying the Saddleback region of Orange County, California, as the fastest growing end of the nation's fastest-growing county.

There, "Warren practiced what he called 'targeted evangelism.'" He created a composite portrait of the unchurched person he wanted to attract: college-educated, married, likes contemporary music, prefers casual dress, has little free time. Then he went to work breaking down the barriers between his church and his target: he made the services shorter and tighter, he invested in the best sound system and musicians, he built the best daycare center, he made sure there was plenty of parking. He didn't wear a suit. (172) The Saddleback Church membership now numbers 20,000, and the campus on which it is located encompasses 120 acres.

"The genius of Rick Warren and many other mega-church leaders was in understanding the people filling the new neighborhoods being created by the Big American Sort and in designing a church just for them." (Bishop, 173)

This is fine if your goal is to pull as many people as possible into your church on the hopeful assumption that many, or even most, of them will be saved from the power of sin and death because in your church they will come to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

But is this the church that reflects Jesus' example? What has happened to the other mission of the church? What has happened to the idea that the church does not exist for its own sake, to grow bigger and stronger and more popular every year, but that the church is called to be a transformer of culture? After all, as Robert Evans of the Hartford Seminary Foundation said, there is "no emphasis in the New Testament on a self-conscious strategy for growth.' Jesus' kingdom was a feast, and those [at the banquet table were] Samaritans

and Jerusalemites, Pharisees and slaves, harlots and the holy.’’ (Bishop, 171) Zacchaeus is at Jesus’ table and, as far as I’m concerned, so is Rick Warren.

The point of the church is not to be a table at which certain kinds of people get to sit. The point of the church is to extend Christ’s table to the whole world, to feed it and heal it and call it to justice. To be God’s kingdom so that we might build God’s kingdom. To build the plane – as Gary said two weeks ago – as we are flying in it. To draw the circle so wide, as Gordon Light’s song says, that no one stands alone.

Drawing a circle, a *true*, perfectly round circle, looks like it should be simple, but it’s not. Do you still have that pen or pencil I asked about at the beginning of the sermon? Give it a try. Draw a circle on the back of the bulletin somewhere. Make it as perfectly round as you can. It’s not easy, is it? The circle never comes out exactly right. The circle is simple, but the task is difficult.

Extending Christ’s table is not simple either. It’s hard because sometimes we’re sitting at the table, taking in much-needed nourishment, and at other times we’re up out of our seats, adding a leaf so that there will be room for more. It’s hard because it’s so tempting to find a place with people we know and understand and just remain seated.

We must always remind ourselves that it is not *our* table, it’s Christ’s table. Christ is at the center, and the table grows from that center, extending outwards from its sacred source. Which is how you draw a perfect circle, of course. You find the center and then move outwards, equally, in all directions.

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.

References

Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why The Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart.* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

John R. Donahue, S.J., “Hope for the Upwardly Mobile,” *America: The National Catholic Weekly* OCTOBER 29, 2001

http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=1182

Paul D. Duke, “A festive repentance - Luke 19:1-10” *The Christian Century*, October 18, 1995.

John Jewell, “A View From the Tree” Sunday November 1, 1998.

<http://www.lectionarysermons.com/nov98-1.html>