

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A pastor was leading an opening “ice-breaker” for a retreat for the elected lay leaders of her congregation. She began by asking, “Can I have some volunteers to come up here in front and form a circle?” People stood, some quickly and some hesitantly, and they came forward.

After the circle had been formed, the pastor asked, “Why is it that when we are asked to form a circle, we automatically look inward, and look at one another? What would happen if the circles we formed looked outward, toward the people who are not a part of our circle?”

“Our circles would grow,” one leader immediately responded. Another person chimed in, “Our church would not remain the same!” But another person queried, “Why would we want to change?” Needless to say, this church leadership retreat started with a rather intense discussion about the role, nature, and the mission of the church.

Which way do we choose to form our circles? Do the circles we form with our families, our work colleagues, the members of our communities, our sisters and brothers in the church – do these circles reflect our desire to be open and welcoming?

Do these circles reflect the kind of warm hospitality and gracious acceptance that Jesus practiced in his ministry? Or do we form our circles in ways that primarily preserve what we hold dear, even to the extent that we exclude those and all that which threatens?

Saying it that way sounds especially negative but, in many respects, isn’t it somewhat natural for us to orient toward that which is familiar and comfortable?

After all, isn’t this one purpose of families and like-minded social groupings? It just makes sense for us to look out for ourselves and the members of the groups to which we belong.

One of the advantages of belonging is the feeling of commonality that comes with it – a certain sense of comfort, and a feeling and experience of safety and acceptance. We appreciate the people who share things in common with us; we look to those who are like us for support and encouragement.

But one down-side of our circles of familiarity, and our formation tendencies with regard to them, is to exclude: not only to keep some out, but also to keep us from venturing out into areas where we might expand, learn, and contribute. Such exclusions can happen wherever there are people.

I think I'm safe in saying that today's Gospel is among the most well-known of all of Jesus' parables, but not all will remember that this story is set up for telling by the scribes and Pharisees who complain, saying of Jesus, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2).

The circle of the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day was a tightly-drawn, exclusive gathering of common-minded, rigidly-legalistic religious leaders. Only those who obeyed the law perfectly, or at least who professed to doing so, were included.

Within this circle, members would constantly thank God that their circle and group was different, special, and unique. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus' encounters with these scribes and Pharisees constantly reinforce this point.

The scribes and Pharisees not only used the law, but also their interpretation of the law, to make certain that people who were dissimilar – the people they named as "sinners" – would never be included within the strictly-enforced boundaries of their circle.

Jesus tells the story in today's Gospel, the story of the prodigal son, or of the waiting father, or of the resentful brother – call it what you will, but Jesus tells this story in response to those who stubbornly resisted welcoming those who were different, or who failed to measure up to their standards.

And the importance of the story is not only that the wandering, wasteful son comes to his senses, and returns to the good graces (and welcoming arms) of his father; but also this story is told in stark contrast to the older son who believes that his brother should be excluded from the circle of his father's family.

In the end, of course, the loving father reassures the recalcitrant and resentful older son that his property has always belonged to this older son. The return of his younger brother does nothing to change the deep, abiding love that the father has for both sons.

But this now brings us back to the original question: How do we draw the circles of our families, community, and church?

Even as we ask the question, honesty demands that we acknowledge our sin, selfishness, and self-centeredness, and fully admit that, were it not for Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, we would be, as we fully deserve to be, fully and completely outside the circle of God's grace.

Truth be told, we have sinned, and are not righteous. We are prodigals, wayward and misdirected, and even if we would come to our senses and try to return to the circle of God's family, we could never do so on our own, for our sin is an insurmountable barrier to our being in the circle of God's love and grace – but Jesus Christ has changed that for us.

By his atoning death on the cross Jesus Christ cancels out the sin of those who are truly penitent, and brings us to God who is forgiving, patient, and loving – and ever willing to expand the circle of the family to include all people. Such is the power and nature of God’s grace!

In Christ we see that God is not One whose primary intent is to make rules and regulations to exclude; in Christ we see that God is not One who would make it difficult for us to enter the kingdom of God.

In Christ we see the grace and mercy of the eternal God who sent Jesus to guide us toward the circle of God’s love, and God is intent on throwing a party upon our return!

In every respect, the words that the father says in today’s Gospel about his wayward son are the words that God says 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” (Luke 15:32).

As we realize and come to appreciate the great power of God’s grace and the impact that it has upon our lives, this Good News should help us to live and celebrate our lives with joy and thanksgiving. It should allow us to look at each day and each opportunity to serve as a gift of God’s grace.

And perhaps just as importantly, it should challenge us to draw our circles so that they are inclusive.

It should help us to expand our own circles of hospitality so that all people we touch might also know the touch of God’s wonderful, welcoming, inclusive grace. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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