

A Circle for Pam

I love Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Don't get me wrong – I love many other parts of the Bible, as well, but there is something special about this letter, because Paul talks about the core of his faith, about what the church is when we are at our best, and most powerfully of all, about our salvation by grace. In fact, I had the reference Ephesians 3:20 engraved on the inside of Rick's wedding band, because it refers to God being able to do more than we can even think or imagine in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit within us. It is a joy for me to share with you this passage from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus.

(Scripture)

Several years ago Rick went with a group from our church on our first international mission trip – to Nairobi, Kenya. Among those in the group was a lovely, kind, optimistic young mother who was an art teacher in one of our local high schools. Pam tended to be a bit naive at times, and occasionally she would wander off from the group as they were visiting the local tourist destinations or historical landmarks. Usually she would have joined a group of children playing in the street, or wandered down an alleyway filled with chalk drawings. Pretty soon someone would call out, “Has anyone seen Pam? We need to find Pam!” Wandering off from your group is never a good idea in a city – or country – that is unfamiliar, and Nairobi was then and still is a city that often harbored danger to the innocent

visitor. So the group would set out to find sweet Pam and make sure she was okay and reminded her to stay with the group. Pretty soon they learned to keep watch on Pam lest she stray off from the rest. To do that, they would form a sort of circle around her as they walked to their assignments; not being aggressive about it, just keeping her safe.

There are many parables in the New Testament of God doing exactly that – going out to search for the one lost sheep, longing, watching for the return of the prodigal son, looking all over the house for the lost coin. Don't we all have a story sort of like that? Of the time we innocently wandered away and lost sight of the God who loves us? Or became angry and stormed off when life didn't go quite the way we thought it should? Or, lost and alone and suffering, we saw a sign on a wall or a person stretched out a hand or we heard a song that called us to that safe place where we found our way?

Paul says that this is not only what God is like, but it is what the church should be like. As I was growing up I understood the word “lost” to mean people in countries who had never heard of Jesus, or people nearby who rejected God and didn't come to church. While that definition still might be true, I now understand that the lost may live next door, or in the next community, or at the grocery store with us, or ... even in the pew next to us – perhaps in our own family. John Hamish says that we are “called to be about the business of seeking, hunting for the hurting, drawing, nudging, gathering others into the circle of Christ's love..” John Wesley describes God's grace as

“prevenient grace;” grace that goes before us, draws us, nudges us, seeks us and finds us. And we are to be agents of that grace, as Paul reminds us in verse 10 - “We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works.” Although he makes it clear that our salvation comes by grace, not by works, so that no one can boast, the result of experiencing God's grace is to *want* to do good and share grace with others.

In this passage Paul calls us to remember that all of us were once outsiders, separated, alienated, strangers or sojourners... aliens, even. But now we are included in the circle of grace, no longer strangers. I hope, and I believe that the desire of this church family is that all persons who enter here will sense that *they* are no longer strangers, but they are welcomed, accepted, received as members of the fellowship, part of the family circle, one in Christ. Our call is to make our circle wide enough for each of us to explore, to try our wings, to make each one aware of the beauty of his or her own individual life. To celebrate victories, and to make mistakes without being judged.

Yet as we need to widen our circle, Pastor Harmish reminds us to keep the circle tight enough that no one ever gets lost again. Because that is a possibility for each of us. He says, “I need the sustaining circle of God's people to surround me in grace and hold me in love and keep me on the right track.” And that includes the children. The children here today will not remember the words we say. But they will remember that Mr. Rick tossed them into the air, laughing, and that Mrs. Susan always remembered their

names and spoke to them with respect and love, and that Miss Melissa loved them within an inch of their lives, and treasured each one. That's grace. That kind of grace makes God's love real to each of us. It makes us want to keep sight of one another and pay attention when someone seems to be hurting or wandering away.

Perhaps this is a conversation we need to have around our table. Who needs to be drawn into our circle? And how can we keep our eyes open to see through the distance of color, age, intellectual level, financial situation, gender identification, or sexual identity – whatever separates us from another - and speak a word of grace? Give a hug? Smile encouragingly? Be of good courage -each one of us can do something this week to draw another closer to our circle, if we allow the Holy Spirit to work through us.

I would like to close with an amazing post I read on Facebook yesterday (yes, Facebook!) and offer it as a challenge to each of us:

Come out of your churches, your mosques, your temples. God can hear ;your prayers for peace, justice, and hope in this broken world just fine while you're out creating peace, working for justice, and giving hope to this broken world. When will we finally understand that we are all drops of the same ocean, hurting together, healing together, hoping together? So don't just pray for hands to heal the hurting; pray with hands that ARE healing the hurting. Don't just pray for arms to help the helpless; pray with arms that ARE

HELPING the helpless. Don't just pray for feet to respond to need; pray on feet that are responding to need. Don't just pray for someone to do something; be someone who does something. Don't just pray for answers. Be the answer!

May it be so.