

Widening the Circle **May 15, 2022**

There is a comic that makes me chuckle whenever I read it. It depicts Jesus standing on a small hill, teaching a crowd of people. Jesus says, “Be kind to everyone!”

Someone in the crowd asks, “Wait, even Gary?” Another person adds, “Yeah, Gary’s the worst.”

Jesus responds, “Look, we’ve been through this. Yes, be kind to Gary as well.”

Another person in the crowd pipes up, “Ha! You’re wrong, losers!”

In the final caption, Jesus puts his hand to his head and says, “Not now, Gary.”

We all have a Gary in our lives, don’t we? There’s always someone who’s hard to love. Jesus gives us a pretty tall order though. In John’s Gospel, we hear Jesus’ final words to his disciples before he is arrested and crucified. And you have to figure, since Jesus knows what’s coming, and he knows that this is the last time he’s going to see his disciples this side of the grave, you have to figure he is going to make his words count. He is planning to give his most important words now, before he is killed.

And Jesus lays down his teaching: “Love one another.” And just to drive the point home, he repeats it. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And if it’s worth saying twice, it’s worth saying three times: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

There you have it. And we might want to soften that a little. Jesus is talking to his disciples, or rather, 11 of the disciples (Judas has just left the room). We might argue that Jesus is saying, “You eleven have to love each other.” Or if we’re feeling generous, maybe we could extrapolate a bit to argue that Jesus is saying, “You followers of mine have to love other followers of mine.” In other words, love other Christians. Everyone else, don’t worry about. Christians you have to love.

But knowing Jesus, we know that he’s probably not saying that we should only love people who are inside our circle. And as evidence, we can look to our first reading, from the Book of Acts. The whole reading is an illustration of God widening the circle of who (or what) is acceptable.

To start, Peter has a vision about dietary laws. You might know that faithful Jewish folks have pretty strict regulations about what they can eat – no shellfish, no pork, only certain birds. But Peter has this vision in which God tells him that all foods are clean to eat (and God says this not once, not twice, but three times). God is widening the circle of what foods faithful people can eat.

But that’s just the beginning. That is priming the pump for what happens next. Three Gentiles show up. Normally, Jews and Gentiles don’t mix (because Jews would worry that they’d be

made unclean), but God has told both Peter and this Gentile leader that it's okay for them to mingle. Peter goes and visits this house of Gentiles; he preaches to them, and the Holy Spirit comes to them, to Gentiles, to people outside of God's chosen circle! God is widening the circle.

So that is the background for our Gospel lesson. If we want, we can say that Jesus only told the 11 disciples to love each other or to love other Christians. But given what we know about who God is, we know that God always widens the circle. And if Gentiles can receive the Holy Spirit, then there is no one who is beyond God's love. There is no one outside the circle. We are called to love everyone.

That's hard to do. We are human beings. We like some people and dislike others. We all know a Gary. That's how it is.

Social psychologist Brené Brown offers a helpful insight. Brené Brown is someone I've mentioned before. She has wonderful insights on healthy relationships and living faithfully in your own skin. A wise woman.

Brené wrote about an interaction she had with someone she despised. Afterwards, Brené described the interaction to her therapist. Her therapist didn't mince words, but asked a powerful question of Brené: "Do you believe that that person is doing the best that she can?"

That's question stuck with Brené. Do you believe everyone, including the people we don't like, is doing the best that they can? So Brené started asking everyone she knew if they believed that was true. What do you think?

Over time, a pattern emerged in the answers she received. Either people said emphatically, "No, people are not always doing the best that they can;" or they said, "Yes, but..." and qualified their answer.

To be honest, there's no way to answer that question for sure, "Are people doing the best that they can?" But Brené realized that how folks answered that question had an effect on how they treated others.

If we choose to believe that everyone is doing the best that they can in any given situation, based on past experiences, based on how they're feeling that day, based on the few circumstances they can control... if we believe that, we tend to be more forgiving, more empathetic, more kind.

If we don't believe that, we tend to be a little more cynical, a bit more harsh in judging people.

That bit of research from Brené Brown has always stuck with me. And I have to confess, there are days when I struggle to believe that everyone is doing the best that they can. Some days, I think, "Surely, they could be trying just a little bit harder."

But I try – and I encourage you to try – to believe that everyone is doing the best that they can. Their words, their actions, their beliefs are the best that they can bring to the table, given their whole story.

If we can believe that, then we can start to see others as God sees them. We can start to look beyond our circle of friends and acquaintances, our circle of people whom we like, to see that there is no one who is outside of the circle of who is acceptable. There is no one who does not deserve love. God widens the circle so that everyone is God's child. And God calls us to widen our circles as well.

I'll close with a poem called "Outwitted," by Edwin Markham.

He drew a circle that shut me out—

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But Love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle that took him in!

Edwin Markham. "Outwitted." <https://selfeducatedamerican.com/2015/08/27/outwitted-by-edwin-markham/>. Accessed May 13, 2022.

Amen.

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