

Living in an Open Circle

EPHESIANS 2:11-22

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Sandy and I were riding down the hotel elevator in Columbus, Ohio, this week. Next to us stood a short, cute woman named Suzy. Suzy was a delegate to our Community Church Conference. And she was excited. You see, Suzy is an Eskimo woman from Wassail, Alaska. And on Wednesday night, Suzy experienced a thunderstorm for the first time in her life! She'd never before seen lightning, or heard the rumble of thunder. She thought it was *wonderful!* In fact, the children who were also in her delegation stood by the window of their fourteenth floor hotel room, absolutely mesmerized by nature's fireworks! The circle of their life experience was stretched to include this exciting new discovery.

Suzy and the children were members of the Majestic Mountain Community Church in Wasilla. They describe their church as an *inclusive* Christian fellowship that is ecumenical, interracial, and intercultural. It is a church that spreads its arms to reach *everyone*. In much the same way that Suzy and the kids found the circle of their experience stretching to include a good old midwestern thunderstorm, the Majestic Mountain Community Church *itself* lives as an open circle of God's amazing grace.

And that's what I want to chat with you about – *living in an open circle*. But first, let me tell you about the great toilet paper caper.

Nothing I ever learned in Seminary prepared me for what I encountered in the very first church I pastored all by myself. I was at the Annual Meeting, and we were dealing with some very important issues about the church's ministry and mission. There was a healthy debate about how our work would be funded for the coming year, and a detailed analysis of what had happened in the year gone by. Somewhere in the course of looking ahead and reflecting backwards, though, someone spotted it in the Treasurer's report. It was a line item under the Trustees budget: *Toilet paper - \$49.99*.

Now this was a small church with a small budget. \$49.99 was a lot of money! And \$49.99 back in those days bought a lot of toilet paper. Someone said to the chair of the Trustees, "*Jack, why in the world did you spend \$49.99 on toilet paper?*" Jack turned about four different shades of red, and then blurted out, "*I DIDN'T buy \$49.99 worth of toilet paper... but I'd like to get my hands on who did!*"

There was a rumbling and a grumbling among the people, and fingers were pointed at each other. Everybody had a theory about who it was who bought the paper, and being New Englanders at an annual meeting in the dead-cold middle of winter, they didn't hesitate to heat things up by publicly accusing each other of being the culprit.

"*When I get my hands on whoever did this without the authority of the Board,*" Jack bellowed, "*I'll...*" But Jack never finished the sentence. He stopped short when a small voice chirped, "*I did it. I bought the paper. I saw it on sale – 2 for 1 – and I thought in the long run it would save the church some money,*" said....Jack's...wife!

We never did make any important decisions that year about our ministry and mission. But we did pass a resolution saying that anyone who wanted to buy toilet paper

for the church should check first with the Board of Trustees, or be prepared to pay for it themselves. Funny what we fight about in church! Often, it's silly stuff – like the great toilet paper caper. Or what color should we paint the front door?

But sometimes our fights are much more important. Do you know what the very first major fight was about in the New Testament Christian Church? It was a monumental battle about whether the church should be a *closed* circle, or an *open* circle. In a sense, it was a struggle about whether Christianity would be a *denominational* or a *community* church!

You see, our Community Church movement flows from a struggle that goes back to the very beginning of Christendom. On the one side was Peter and the Jerusalem Church. They adamantly argued that the Gospel was for those already inside the circle. God's promises were for Jews only. The role of the church was to take care of those inside it! But on the other side was St. Paul who insisted that the circle must be opened – to *everyone*! And the fledging Gentile congregations in Ephesus and Corinth and Galatia stood with Paul, for they had come to know Christ by way of those who believed the Church must be an *open* circle. And thank the Lord, Paul's side won that argument, because less than forty years later, that Jerusalem church died, as closed circles always do. The Gospel came to *us* through those churches planted by Paul. They were churches taught to be *open* circles of God's amazing grace.

Our reading from the second chapter of Ephesians tells us that the death of Christ on the Cross requires us to live in an open circle. The Cross upon which the Savior died has been placed in the very center of all the little circles in which we live, and in His death, the dividing walls have all been flattened.

Now, *we are to step into each other's lives, learn to love one another in Christ, and work together to bring Christ's healing to the world.* Are you willing to live in an open circle? You shouldn't answer that question too quickly. Most of us don't really fathom what it involves to live in an *open* circle. In fact, what many of us think are the open circles of our lives are not really *open* circles at all, but rather simple extensions of closed circles.

For instance, I can tell you honestly that it's easy for me to relate comfortably with the International Council of Community Churches. We are the most racially inclusive religious body in North America and probably the world. Half our churches are comprised of primarily Caucasian members, and half have mainly African-American members. Our annual Conferences are exhilarating celebrations of a diverse Christian community with many kinds of music and preaching and worship.

What a thrill it is for some of us white ministers to preach sermons that the congregation actually helps you with! *Amen! Yes, Lord! Ah, hah! Thank you, Jesus!* Preaching is a *team sport* in black churches! In fact, if you're making a really good point, and the African-American congregation is with you, they'll sometimes holler, "*Take your time!*" They don't worry about tee times or brunch at the Yacht Club. You can go two, three hours if you're hot. *Take your time!* But, if you're standing up there preaching a real dud, someone – sooner or later – will call out, "*Step it up!*" – which is simply a polite way of saying, "*You lost us a long time ago, so why don't you just stop now, so maybe we can go and GET a tee time!*"

Now, it's easy for me to be a part of this kind of experience because my life was formed and nurtured during the Civil Rights Movement. My pastor, George Seale, was a

Civil Rights activist. In fact, Reverend Seale once rented an apartment he owned to a black family and some of the neighbors wanted to lynch him. They harassed the black family, hoping they'd move away. When my parents found out about this, they threw the three of us kids into the car and down to the apartment. We drove to greet the family, and offer them a housewarming gift, and to spend an evening enjoying each other's company as friends. I guess it was also to symbolize to our white friends that if they messed with the Hazzards, they messed with the Singley's, too.

My life circle has, from the earliest years, included close relationships with African-Americans. But last Friday night, I discovered that, though, the circle may be wide, *it isn't really as open as I thought*. Dr. Greg Smith, our new Council President was preaching. Greg is someone I deeply love and respect. He preached a marvelous message about how openness to each other creates struggle – because we are different, because we see and experience things differently. He said the struggle is painful; it is fraught with difficulty. But it is *out of this struggle of the open circle that God brings blessing! It has always been so!*

That really inspired me – until Greg spoke about the apology. Do you know what I'm talking about? There is discussion in the land today about whether or not the government of the United States of America ought to offer an apology to African-Americans for its complicity in the human slavery that existed prior to the Civil War. Smith was very impassioned about this. He reminded us of the fact that we have apologized to Japanese Americans interred during World War II, and the Native Americans whose lands were unjustly taken, and that we have even rebuilt at great cost the countries of those who have attacked us in war. And yet, Greg Smith intoned, there are many who believe that an apology to African-Americans is not needed. Believe me, none of the black delegates were telling Greg Smith to *step it up*. They were right with him, team-preaching the point with great passion.

I found myself in a strange place. For all the connection I have had with African-Americans from my youngest years, for all the openness I *thought* I had, I found myself very closed and disconnected to what Greg was saying. I wondered why Greg needed to clutter up a really great sermon with this apology business. Well, after reflecting upon this over the past forty-eight hours, I now realize that I was listening to Greg Smith from within my own circle, through the walls of my own experience as a middle-class white person. I was hearing him through the walls of my political orientation which runs toward the wall of my own lifetime of interracial experience which I had thought was pretty tolerant and empathetic toward blacks, and really had nothing to apologize for.

I guess what I did was to hear Greg through the thick walls that still surround the circle of my life no matter how *wide* I might think that circle to be. But what I did *not* do was to hear Greg's words from within *his* circle, from behind *his* eyes, from within *his* experience. Might life look a little bit different if you see it from within the heart of another?

That's what it means to live in an *open* circle. It is open not so much to let others in as it is to let you *out*! It is not to stretch out *your* world, but to *step into another's world*. You see, that's the Jesus story! The Word became flesh and dwelt among us! The sacred became the secular. The divine became human! God became one of us! God stepped out of His own circle, and took up residence within *our* circle. He saw what we see, he heard what *we* hear, he experienced *our* pain, and he *took it upon himself*! And, in

so doing, Ephesians tells us, Jesus died! That's what happens when you live in an open circle. You die with Christ to the smallness of your life, and you are raised with Christ into a daring new creation that becomes *redemptive* to others when you step into *their* circle and learn to love from there.

I'm not sure I agree with Greg about the apology, but I'm now trying to understand why he feels about it as he does. Living in an open circle does *not* mean we buy into everybody else's viewpoints and behaviors. It means we commit ourselves to loving others no matter what, and out of that love seeking to understand them.

I love the story about the grandfather whose 14-year old grandson came to visit. They were riding along in the grandfather's big Buick when the grandfather said, "*Timmy, why don't we put on some music.*" He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a tape. It was rap music! Timmy looked incredulously at his grandpa. "*You sure you want to listen to this, Grandpa?*" "*Of course,*" his grandfather said. "*I don't understand all the words, but I really like the beat.*" So Timmy, with a smile, put in the tape and down the road they went, that big Buick putting out the pulsing bass notes like a loudspeaker on wheels.

Later, Timmy's grandfather, in the privacy of his own bathroom, swallowed three or four Excedrin tablets. Living in an open circle is not as easy as it sounds. But it is where God brings people together. I have a lot of work to do in opening up the circle of my life. I hope you'll work at it, too.