

Reckless Love: Week Two – Expand the Circle

March 8, 2020 Pastor Katie Matson-Daley

Last week, we started our “Reckless love” series with the theme, “begin with love.” Oh wow. I don’t know about you, but for me it was a needed reminder. At one point I found myself getting angry and one of you actually reminded me to, “begin with love.”

It’s been a good spiritual practice for the first week of Lent to remember, or even to be aware of how infrequently I remembered, to begin with love.

Today, we move on to the second spiritual practice for Lent, which is to “Expand the Circle.”

Have you ever been to a party or a wedding, where the dancing is just incredibly fun? Like maybe it starts with just a few people on the dance floor, but they start inviting their friends, and their aunties, and their grandpas and pretty soon you’ve got your hands on the back of your Uncle Wayne’s shoulders and you’re doing the conga line led by the bride and the flower girl? It is joy. People are sometimes reluctant to get up but as their loved ones pull them up, they really get going and it’s a blast.

One of the things that make Christianity unique in the world of religions is that we believe in what we call the triune God. There is one God, but this one God is three persons. Parent (father), Jesus (son) and Holy Spirit. And this trinity – tri-UNITY, is one of the most mysterious parts of our faith. No metaphors can do this mystery justice, but there is a word that is helpful for understanding this idea.

The word is perichoresis. Oh, thanks Katie. A long Greek word. That is super helpful. (Laughing but serious.)

Let’s break it down. “Peri” means circle, like our word perimeter, it’s the circle around the outside. “Choresis” has the same root as our word for choreography, it’s a dance. So perichoresis is the circle dance between the members of the Trinity. The Father is not the Son or the Spirit, The Spirit is not the Father, nor the Son. The Son is not the Father, nor the Spirit. Our God is diverse. Perichoresis is often translated as inner penetration. The Father is in the Son and the spirit, the spirit is in the Father and the Son, the Son is in the Spirit and the Father.

All that to say, our God is diverse, our God is love, and our God is involved in a beautiful circle dance. Maybe not exactly like the conga, but here’s the good news. We are invited on to the dance floor.

Many of us have stories of realizing that we were invited into God’s dance. Maybe it was at camp when you sat in the chapel and heard about Jesus’ love. Maybe it was in Sunday school. Maybe it was the grace that was extended to you when you faced a bigger challenge than you could handle on your own. Many of us have more than one story.

But we weren’t just invited to dance with God. No, the circle is much bigger.

When Jesus walked the earth, he invited folks to the dance. Come and follow me. People who collected taxes for the Roman Empire and people who wanted to destroy the Empire. People who were professionals and people who were working class. People who were close enough to lay their heads on his chest during meals, and people who would sell him out after the same meal for 30 pieces of silver. People who were from his ethnic group and people who were not. Adults that were older than him, people who were his peers, and children that were too young to be involved in “important grown up things.” Women and men. His followers led by the Spirit expanded that circle, gentiles, Ethiopian eunuchs, all the ends of the earth.

See, this circle dance is the work, the joyful work, the sometimes-hard work, but the most meaningful alive work that we can be a part of. Expand the circle, invite new people into the circle and engage meaningfully with people who are a part of the circle.

There are all kinds of reasons that people don’t join the circle. They maybe have never been invited. They maybe have been invited but are afraid of being judged. They may be present at the wedding dance, but don’t know that they have permission to get up and dance. There may be physical barriers to getting up and dancing, or there may be emotional barriers. But with church it is urgent that we get as many people on the dance floor as we can.

There is an idea out there called the “homogenous growth principle.” This idea says that for churches to grow faster they need to target people who are just like the existing people in the church. There are lots of church consultants that will tell you to use this principle to your advantage.

There are two problems with this principle though. First is that “people like us,” largely already have a church home. If you were to reach out only to people who are like the average member here at First UMC Red Wing, you would be targeting people who grew up in church, in South Eastern, Minnesota, likely Red Wing, Lake City, Ellsworth or Zumbrota, are European American, folks in their 70s who either are married or widowed, and most of the people in Red Wing who fit that bill already have a church home that they associate with.

The second problem is that Jesus’ great commission is not to go and make disciple of all the people who are a lot like you, but “go and make disciples of all nations.” Diversity is a scriptural imperative. Because we believe that each person is made in the image of God, we know God more as we get to know our neighbors who are different than us.

Our scripture today says that Christians aren’t just supposed to love our friends, people who are like us, but we are to love our enemies, people who have different ideologies, different cultural backgrounds, different differences.

Erik Carter is a professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt, and he has done some consulting work and training with churches about how we can better include people with disabilities in our congregations. But what is so interesting about the work that he does is

that you could take his teachings about disability work and translate it to racial difference, age, sexuality and gender, language, socio- economics, country of origin, any dimension of diversity we could use Dr. Carter's framework on.

For people to really feel like they are a part of a community that they BELONG there, they are:

- **Present** – Folks have to be physically present to feel like they belong.
- **Welcomed** - People feel like others are genuinely glad that they are there.
- **Known** – Do people know who you are? Do they know how many children you have, whether this is your first or second marriage? What you do for a living? Are you known to the community, not just as “that person who sits in the third row,” but as a three-dimensional human being?
- **Accepted** – Are you judged or shamed for you are? Are you avoided or accepted?
- **Supported** – are there people who support you through the hard times?
- **Cared for** – are there people who care for you during hard times? Someone to make you dinner when you're going through treatment?
- **Befriended** – Do you feel like the people at church are friends. Some of us have been here so long that we can answer, of course I have friends. But there are others I know who worship weekly for years but don't feel like they have a friend in the congregation. I like how Dr. Carter describes it:
“I want to just highlight here that when we think about befriending people, I'm really talking about the importance of what takes place between Sundays. You can't address a friendship in three hours on a Sunday morning substantively. This is about life lived together beyond the walls of the congregation. It's really what pushes us from acquaintances to friendships. And that means inviting someone to share a cup of coffee, participate in a favorite hobby, watch the big game, visit the mall, go for a walk in the park, or join the same small group.”
- **Loved** –Do you feel loved by the family of faith at church? For some of us the answer is an easy yes. For others the answer is a hard no, for most it's probably a mixed bag.

The Homogenous growth principle has some merit, if you want to grow bigger and you're in a location where there are a lot of people “like your existing people” looking for a church home, you can grow fast. But we are interested not in growing fast, but in growing in HOLY LOVE, reckless love, Jesus love, and the BEST way to grow in Holy Love is to be in a loving relationship, of deep belonging with people who are different from us.

Last week we talked a little about the barnacles of sin on our souls. When we are around other people who are mostly like us, our barnacles all kind of fit together, and it's easier to ignore the ways that we fall short of loving God with all of our hearts and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. But when we encounter people who are different than us, our barnacles become uncomfortable.

As a healthy-ish young person, it's easy for me to be a little blasé about health, but because I am in relationship with people much older than me, and with people who have compromised immune systems because of cancer treatment, I know that taking care to wash my hands and to be mindful about the spread of disease is a good way to love my neighbor. As a straight cis-gendered person, I can think about LGBTQ+ inclusion as an issue to be debated, but because I am in relationship with trans, bi, gay, lesbian and gender non-conforming folks, I understand that language matters and working for inclusion is personal and important. A man who has sat with women who have been passed over for leadership positions and heard their frustrations at being twice as good to get half as far can understand why so many women were sad this week when the top two women left in the presidential race dropped out. Intentionally, purposefully being in relationship with people who are different than us is one of the best ways to grow in holy love.

It's a good way to grow in holy love, not only because it is one of the ways that God deals with the sin in our lives, but it also helps us to better understand who God is. Each person is made in the image of God, so when you know people who are very different, you can come to better understand who God is. Marrying into a Pentecostal Caribbean family has taught me more about God's holiness and the power of God's spirit as fire. While for my husband Richard, worshipping at a Lutheran Church in Saint Paul, MN helped him to understand the God's spirit as peace and water. Walking in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women's march has taught me the power of lament, rhythm and song in the face of injustice.

How can you Expand the circle this week?

Our spiritual practice this week is to Expand the Circle. Let's find ways this week to expand our circle of friends, our circle of care, our circle of influence. Who will you invite to the dance?