

Circles of Love
Isaiah 61:1-4; John 3:16-21
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Isaiah 61:1-4

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

John 3:16-21 (The Message)

“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under

the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

“This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is.”

This whole passage, really, is fantastic news. The whole reason Jesus came into the world was to put us into right relationship with God. Anyone who believes in Jesus doesn't have to worry about being in trouble with God. When Jesus came, God sent light into the darkness. People started to scatter because they were afraid that light was going to show how messed up they were. But the people who welcome the light into the world are in good shape with God.

I remember where I was when I first realized that this good news was for me—when I first realized what it meant that God loved me so much that he gave his only Son for me, so that I wouldn't perish but have eternal life.

I was at a youth retreat, probably in seventh or eighth grade. Those were not the easiest years for me. My sisters were cheerleaders and wrestlerettes; winning the spelling bee did not exactly bring me the same feeling of being loved and accepted. In fact winning the spelling bee just cemented the feeling that I was a loser in the social hierarchy of my junior high.

And then at a youth retreat, a speaker was talking one night about how much God loved us in Jesus Christ, and how Jesus did not die on the cross for a nameless, faceless group of people that he didn't really care about. The Speaker looked around the group of us kids and said to one of my close

friends, “Steve, if you were the only person who had ever been born, Jesus still would have died on the cross for you.”

He might as well have said it to me. The idea that Jesus didn’t just love the whole world—but that he loved ME—unloveable, unpopular, Spelling-bee winning loser me—changed the trajectory of my life. I felt like I was right in the middle of this circle of love that Jesus had drawn around me.

And Jesus loves you just the same way. If you were the only person who had ever been born, Jesus would have died for you, too. You’re right in the middle of that circle of love, too.

That is amazing...and it’s absolutely true...and the most amazing thing is that God’s love is so big that it’s not just a circle restricted to each one of us. God’s love keeps expanding that circle.

That’s because God doesn’t just love you or me as individuals that much; Jesus loves everyone that much. Jesus loves us all, collectively, that much. For instance, Jesus loves all of us here, together, in this church that much.

That’s one reason why I’m disappointed by Nancy’s leaving, but I’m not worried. I mean, I sure wish Nancy were staying. She’s a fantastic pastor and a great colleague and an inspiring leader. Nancy is one of those people that when she’s not here, you feel like the someone forgot to turn on the lights. I will really miss her—so much. I’m really disappointed that she’s leaving.

But I don’t have to be worried. God loves us all too much for me to be worried. I mean, Nancy is amazing and all, but God came as Jesus Christ to die for all of us in this church—that’s how big that circle of love is—so yeah, Nancy is amazing! But God has this well under control. God loves us that much. The same God who has been loving us into a new future under Nancy’s leadership over the last year will continue to love us in the years to come.

Besides, Nancy is demonstrating how God’s circle of love is wider than just being drawn around each one of us individually, or even all of us collectively.

That's because God's circle of love for the world that gave Jesus to die for us invites us to make the circle even bigger!

Nancy is modeling that for us as she is choosing to honor her parents and tangibly love them during this time when it also disrupts her plans to continue to serve here until the new pastor comes.

This kind of selfless love gives us a glimpse of the big circle of love that Jesus gives us. God sent Jesus here to earth, for a specific selfless purpose. Jesus didn't just randomly show up here because he didn't have anything else to do. God didn't give Jesus to us because he thought Joseph and Mary would be cool parents for Jesus or because Bethlehem wasn't that far from the beach. No—God gave us Jesus to broaden the circle of love.

And that circle of love is very selfless. As our passage says, the circle of love doesn't bring condemnation; it brings salvation. Jesus put his love for us before any concern for himself. I don't think Jesus was up in heaven wistfully hoping he could come to earth and go to the cross to win our salvation. But Jesus broadened the circle of love, taking on our pain and sorrow and sin, so that we could have the eternal life that he wanted for us.

And Jesus empowers us to keep expanding the circle of love in this same way—to be selfless as we love others. To think about other people's sufferings even if we don't know them or come into contact with them ourselves. Rather than ignoring their problems, Jesus helps us love them selflessly, as he does.

We have seen a great example of that over the last couple of weeks as many people have risen up in opposition to the policy of separating migrant children from their parents at the southern border of the United States.

A recent statement by Craig Barnes, the president of Princeton Seminary, about the issue really captures my feelings about the issue. In part, here is what it said:

The immigration issue in our country is complicated and requires the rigorous debate in which we are now engaged. Those who wish to invoke a biblical ethic should be guided by this test of love. There is nothing loving about prying children from their parents' arms when families are at their most vulnerable.

The Bible calls us to extend mercy and hospitality to widows, orphans, children, and others who are in need. Let us remember the way that Christ cared for children as God's own beloved ones, saying "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matthew 19:14). May it be so on earth—and in our nation—as it is in heaven.

The God who loves the world enough to send his son into it not to condemn it but to bring it salvation invites us to witness to that kind of love in the world—especially for those people who might not feel that love at all. That's one reason why I give the benediction I give—"May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the LOVE of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you, and with those you love, and who those who feel no love, both now and forever, amen." Everyone is in that circle of God's love that has been given to us in Jesus Christ—but not everyone feels that love.

So that's why it's so important for us to draw attention to and to advocate for the babies and toddlers and children who have been separated from their parents—they are within that circle of love that God has given to us in Jesus Christ. So are their parents—no matter what the circumstances of their arrival in the United States. But I bet they don't feel that circle of love.

I'm so glad that the government has changed its policy and I pray for a day when Christians and others will live out God's love so fully that there will be good news for all oppressed, everywhere. If we dare dream about a circle of God's love that gave Jesus into the world being fully realized, one day that circle might mean that immigrants would not be driven to come illegally into our country at great risk by the terrible circumstances in their own countries, because the circle of God's love and peace and wholeness—God's shalom—

would be present everywhere and in all places of the world. What could we do to help expand the circle of God's love like that?

This week I saw the circle of God's love expand like that, to people who may not realize it. The circle moved beyond each of us as individuals, beyond us as a collective group, and spread out to people we don't even know...people with no power in our society. I saw Christians expand the circle of love outward and put the words of our Old Testament passage into practice, setting prisoners free. Not because we wanted to be good citizens, but because we were following the God who loves the world enough to give his only son to save it.

I was at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church this past week. It's kind of like the Congress of the denomination; it meets every other year and about 2500 people join together, including commissioners, staff, and observers. I used to be staff but this year I was grateful to be an observer, which involves a lot less work and, in this case, a lot more wonder.

On Tuesday there was an offering and a march where hundreds of people expanded the circle of God's love to encompass those who are held in jail because they can't afford to post bail for minor, non-violent offenses. Although as a country we believe that all are innocent until proven guilty, individuals who do not have the means to post bail after they have been charged with an offense have to stay in jail until their trial occurs.

Innocent until proven guilty does not mean much when you are stuck in jail for weeks or months because you can't pay bail. They often lose their jobs, they are cut off from their families, and they can be shunned from their communities. It obviously affects people of lower income more than people of higher incomes. Virtually any of us here would not have to stay in jail because of a few hundred dollars worth of bail, but poorer folks often do. And these poorer folks are often people of color.

Presbyterians across the country and those at the General Assembly raised almost \$50,000 to post bail for dozens of people in this situation, who had been vetted by the Bail Project, a non-profit dedicated to this cause. Dozens of

people who can now resume their lives until they face trial. Dozens of people who can now do what any of us would have been doing since our charges, since we would have posted bail in the first place.

Dozens of people who have literally been set free from captivity, as our Old Testament scripture say.

Dozens of people who can now believe more easily that the circle of God's love includes them, too.

That circle keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger. It's wonderful to think that we're in the middle of it—that if we were the only person who had ever been born, Jesus would still have come for us. That's wonderful, and it's true.

But it's even more wonderful to think that it is wider than that—that the circle of love that God has given us in Jesus Christ is big enough to surround all of us, together.

And it's even more amazing to think that Jesus is calling us and helping us to expand it even further, around everyone else—especially those who might not feel it includes them, at all.

That's the task—and that's the gift—of the Gospel.

Thanks be to God, and amen.