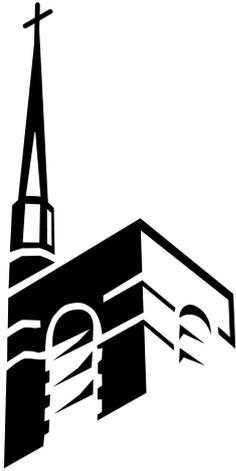


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Twice Told Tales:
“A CIRCLE FOR DOROTHY”

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Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-22

Going back through sermon files, I discovered that the second sermon I preached in this pulpit was a sermon about the nature of the church, “A Circle for Dorothy.” At the time, it just happened to be one of my favorite sermons about what it means to be the church, but as I look back now, perhaps it was more prophetic than I realized.

At the time, I had no idea that one of the major emphases my ministry here would revolve around hospitality—*radical hospitality*. And at the time I had no idea that inclusion of all persons would become such an important theme. At the time, I was just pulling out one of my favorite sermons, hoping I would make a good impression and that you all would keep coming back. And lo and behold...eight years later, here we are. Many of you kept coming back and a whole batch of you showed up and together we have created a fellowship of hospitality, a circle of love for all of God’s children. So here it is again...updated and rehashed, but still one of my favorite sermons from one of my favorite preachers from one of my favorite books of the New Testament...“A Circle for Dorothy.”

If you ask me to choose my favorite book in the New Testament, I’d probably have to say Ephesians. If you ask me to name one of my favorite preachers, it would be the late Bishop James Thomas. And if you ask me to choose my favorite city in Europe, at the top of the list would be Prague in the Czech Republic. Many of you worked there with our mission teams. Some of you have visited as tourists. Even today it can be an imposing and confusing city, but in the communist days, it was dark and foreboding.

Bishop James Thomas, the first African American to be elected a bishop in the United Methodist Church, told the story of visiting Prague with a tour group in those days of oppression. In the group was a woman named Dorothy. It seems every tour group has a Dorothy—maybe a retired school teacher, probably second grade, with a benign face, warm smile, gentle voice, and more curiosity than she can handle. Invariably, the Bishop said, Dorothy would lose interest in the major sights, the landmarks, the tourist destinations, and amble off after a pack of school children or follow her curiosity down one of those narrow side streets and alleyways of the ancient city. Taking off on your own in those days was not permitted by the authorities, and it was dangerous in a city as confusing as Prague. Pretty soon the tour captain would call out, “Has anybody seen Dorothy? We have to find Dorothy.”

And Bishop Thomas says, “That’s grace.”

1. GRACE MEANS GOD SEEKS US.

In the Gospel's great Lost and Found Department, Luke 15, Jesus says:

- God is like a shepherd who has 99 sheep but goes out after the one which is lost.
- God is like a woman who has ten coins, but loses one and searches the whole house until she finds it.
- God is like a prodigal father, longing, yearning for the return of his two lost sons.

God is like a frustrated bus captain and a bunch of tired tourists who comb the streets of an ancient city to find Dorothy.

John Wesley called it “prevenient grace,” grace which goes before, grace which nudges us, draws us, woos us; invites us, seeks us and finds us. To the Roman Christians St. Paul will write, “The proof of God’s amazing love is this...that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) Before we thought of God, God was thinking of us. Before we realized we needed a Savior, Christ came for us. From the very beginning of our life, God reached out to make covenant with us. That’s what we celebrate in the sacrament of infant baptism. Before we are old enough to know God, God knows us. God goes before us, preparing the way, making covenant on our behalf. And that’s grace...the circle of God’s outreaching love and compassion, searching us out, coming to find us and bring us home.

St. Paul tells the Ephesians, “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he has loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together in Christ—by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:4)

And St. Paul suggests this is not only what God is like, but this is what the church is meant to be like, too.

The church is called to be about the business of seeking, drawing, reaching and finding those who are lost. The mission statement of this congregation—“***To gather, nurture and equip disciples for Christ***”—begins with gathering. The task of the church is to send out the search team, seeking the lost, hunting for the hurting, drawing, nudging, gathering others into the circle of Christ’s love. How many examples do we need: hungry?, Friday Night Lights, rummage sales, Live @ First, Vacation Bible School, the CLC, Traveling Tea, mission teams—they are all about opening doors, making a way, gathering others into the fellowship of Christ.

Well, Bishop Thomas said, they would start peeking around the corners, checking out the shops, until finally someone would cry out, “We found her. Here she is. We’ve found Dorothy.” And they would bring her back into the security of the circle once again.

Grace means God seeks us, and when he finds us...

2. GRACE MEANS GOD CLAIMS US AND NAMES US.

God comes to seek us as we are, and when God finds us, he claims us and names us as his own. St. Paul writes, “Remember, at one time you were separated, alienated, strangers to the covenant... BUT NOW in Christ, you have been brought near by the blood of the cross. So you are no longer strangers or sojourners...” (Ephesians 2:11)

- Once you were outsiders, but now you belong.
- Once you were lost, but now you are found.
- Once you were nobody, but now you are a somebody.
- Once you were alone, alien, stranger, but now you are one with the saints, part of the commonwealth, included in the circle of grace, “no longer strangers.”

I love that phrase. I hope it is the desire of every member of this congregation, that every person who enters here would sense that they are no longer strangers, but members of the fellowship, part of the family, one in Christ, known and named and claimed by God’s grace.

I am a firm believer in the power of “naming.”

As you know, my twin brother and I are known as Jack and Jim. Actually, you will get to meet him next week, and I am sure you will notice that he is in fact the *older* twin. As the story goes, our father and mother were married just after Pearl Harbor and he shipped out. He was in the Pacific theatre, serving in India during the Second World War, and the great joke among Dad and his friends was his intention to come home and start his family with twins. And lo and behold, that’s just what he did! He named us James and John—James after his younger brother who did not return from the war, and John...well, what else? But he wanted us to be called Jim and Jack, so we have no middle name, only middle initials: James A. and John E.

There was just one problem. Nobody could tell us apart. To make matters worse, in those days twins dressed alike, even into high school. Even relatives just called us “The Twins.” In high school it was just “Hey, Harnish.”

But in church...there were Sunday school teachers who served up the love of Jesus along with their red Kool-aid and Ritz crackers. There were summer camp counselors took time to talk to me about what God might want to do in my life. There was old Rev. Ross, retired minister in our congregation in the days when retired ministers could wear any color they liked as long a it was black, who took Jim and me under his wing and encouraged us and prayed for us by name. And in the church I came to know that I was loved by God, a unique person of sacred worth, one of a kind, called by name.

One of the primary tasks of the church is to be a place where people know they are loved, accepted, welcomed, that they belong. One of the most powerful moments in the life of the church comes in the sacrament of baptism comes when we ask, “What name has been given this child?” And here in the presence of God and the circle of God’s people, we name them as part of the family. Ethan, Alice, Trudy, God loves you. Rod, Ryan, Rebecca, you are a part of this family. George, Jerry and Jeff, you are welcome here. Frank, Fred and Fran, you are mine, you are loved. You can add your own name in here: Dorothy, dear, lost Dorothy, you are my child, my own.

Grace means God seeks us. Grace means God names and claims us...

3. AND IN THE CIRCLE OF GRACE, GOD SUSTAINS US.

So Bishop Thomas says, a small group of them got together and decided to form an unofficial “Circle for Dorothy” to sort of keep an eye on her. They would walk along, scattered along the outside of the group, non-chalantly acting as if there was no circle, but all the time keeping Dorothy well within their vision and their care. And that’s grace. That’s church. That’s what it means to be the body of Christ, the community of grace. The church is meant to be a circle of love which sustains us and surrounds us, sometimes restraining us, never letting us go; a circle for Dorothy.

My guess is when you saw the sermon title, you thought this sermon was going to be about the other lost Dorothy—Dorothy of the wizard and the yellow brick road—so I might as well bring them in. You know the story. Dorothy finds herself in a strange new world and begins her quest to find her way home. On her journey, she is surrounded by a circle of friends: a Cowardly Lion, a Witless Scarecrow, and a Frozen Tin-man, all imperfect and incomplete in themselves, but together they form a sustaining, guiding, protecting circle for Dorothy. And as they work together to care for her, they too discover their true identities, their gifts, and redeeming grace.

That’s church...a circle for Dorothy.

Last year for our Composer Fest we welcomed choir director and composer Mark Miller. Mark himself has known what it is like to be “outside” the circle. He has experienced the racial prejudice that can arise and the differences that can divide. But even as one who has been outside, he wrote this wonderful song about what it means to be drawn inside:

*Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still.
Let this be our song: no one stands alone.
Standing side by side,
Draw the circle, draw the circle wide.*

As I said, when I preached this sermon eight years ago, I had no idea this would become the major emphases of my time here, but during these years, together we have learned what it means to be a place of radical hospitality, and that drew us into a major building project. Together we have learned to “draw the circle wide” to include others in the circle of grace, to be a circle for every lost Dorothy, every child of God.

One of my favorite theologians is Garrison Keillor and his tales from Lake Wobegon. Keillor tells the story of the Krugers. In seventh grade, all the kids from the Sunny Side School out in the country were bused into the junior high school in Lake Wobegon. On the first day of school, the bus driver gave each child a slip of paper that read “Your storm home is....” and then a name. You see, in winter those Minnesota blizzards could blow up in a matter of a few hours and make it impossible for the buses to take the kids back home at night. So each child was assigned a “storm home,” a family in town where they could spend the night. Keillor says his storm home was the Krugers.

One day he walked by their house, just to see where it was. It was a little cottage down by the lake, petunias and day lilies on the bank down to the lake, rocks painted white, with two metal chairs and a cast iron deer grazing in the front yard. He says the Krugers became very big in his imagination that year. He said he figured they were randomly assigned, but he always liked to think they came down to school and looked over all the children and finally pointed to him and said, "That one, the skinny one...he's the one that if there's a storm, we want him to come to our house." He says he would walk past the house every day, and he imagined going up to the door and knocking. And when Mrs. Kruger came to the door he would say, "I'm your storm child...I'm the one that if there's a storm will come and stay." He imagined Mrs. Kruger would say, "Ah, George, look who's here! It's our storm child! We've been waiting for you. Come on in...bad storm...they say it will get worse before it gets better. Have some cookies and milk."

Keillor says he never went to the Krugers. It seems all the storms that year were manageable ones, but he said he guessed they were more manageable because he knew he could go there if he needed to—go to his storm home. (Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, page 148)

*Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come.
Tis grace that brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

Church, this church, Christ's church is meant to be our storm home. Church, this church, Christ's church is meant to be an ever-widening circle of grace, God seeking the lost and the least and the lonely. Church, this church, Christ's church is meant to be an inclusive circle of sustaining grace so we never get lost again.

She's out there, you know. Dorothy is out there, just waiting for someone to find her, just wandering around, perhaps not even realizing she is lost. Will you help make a circle for Dorothy? And while you are at it, make one for me.

NOTES:

If you check out the Garrison Keillor reference, you will find that in his book *Lake Wobegon Days* he refers to the storm home family as the Krolecks, but on the tape he calls them the Krugers...the freedom of fiction and the storyteller.

Article on the death of Bishop James Thomas, by Kathy L. Gilbert , October 11, 2010:

James Samuel Thomas, was the United Methodist bishop who broke racial barriers when he was assigned to an all-white annual (regional) conference in 1964. "In the loss of Bishop James Samuel Thomas, the church has lost a truly great leader. He was a leader and a bishop without peer," said Bishop Gregory Vaughn Palmer, Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference. "For me he was the

perfect integration of dignity, grace and passion for the gospel that anyone would want to aspire to be no matter how they were serving Jesus Christ.... He will be missed dearly but there will not be a moment in the next days or weeks that will go by that his memory and his teaching will not be evoked. I am grateful for who he was and who he will continue to be as he lives in our hearts.”

Retired Bishop Woodie W. White said he first met Thomas when he came to his college as a chapel speaker. “Thomas was just one of a kind, he was a prince, a statesman, a gentleman.... He was just an outstanding person who always expected the best of everyone and always gave the best of himself.” When White was in the process of being considered for episcopacy, he remembers being asked who his episcopal role model was. “I said, that’s easy, Bishop James Thomas. If there is any episcopal leader who could serve as a model for an aspiring bishop or a new bishop, it was him. He was my model.”



Thomas was born into a Methodist parsonage family in Orangeburg, S.C., on April 8, 1919. He went to Claflin College and then was a rural school principal in Florence County in South Carolina for a year. While serving the Orangeburg Circuit he attended Gammon Theological Seminary and later earned a master’s degree from Drew University. He served as a chaplain at South Carolina State College, a pastor in York, S.C., and then a professor Gammon Theological Seminary. During this time, he earned his doctorate degree from Cornell University. Thomas became associate general secretary of the United Methodist Board of Education in charge of the black colleges. He was in this position when elected to the episcopacy in 1964. He served as Bishop for 12 years in Iowa and another 12 in the East Ohio Conference before retiring in 1988.