

“No longer strangers, but members of the household of God...” (Ephesians 2:19) is such a great promise... that somehow people who are “in Christ” can be at peace, that hostility can come to an end, that dividing walls can be broken down! Such a great vision - the peaceful community, people living in harmony. It is the vision of a *circle* of people, an “inclusive circle” that is welcoming to ALL. Churches and synagogues and temples strive for this; we don't always succeed 100%, but we do work and pray for the reality.

The characteristics of an inclusive circle are fairly obvious; it must be an OPEN circle, not a tightly boundaried circle. There is no cult-like demand for loyalty; people can come and go, and there are natural times of greater or lesser commitment during one's lifetime. I always remember the saying of Edwin Markin of the Universalist church:” A rebel, thing to flout, he drew a circle to keep him out, ... but Love and I had the wit to win, we drew a circle to let him in.” And then of course, an old song... that Anna May sang to us at variety shows: “Young folks, Old folks, everybody come, Come to the Meetinghouse and have a lot of fun!” (Yes, humor and “fun” is an important part of fellowship). An Open Circle says “everybody come!”

Secondly, an inclusive circle is a CONNECTED circle. Think of everyone being able to participate, from young to old. Think of holding hands around a circle (I think of campfires, I think of a little church in Gloucester that always ends with holding hands and singing. Think of everyone being able to see everyone else around a circle (like our Christmas Eve circle!) Think the hands-on activities like missions for clothing, food, education. Think of the connections through thinking and

praying for each other during the week. Prayer is what some call the oldest, and largest wireless connection in the world. Prayer keeps us in a Connected Circle.

Third, an inclusive circle is a SAFE circle. In Christ's spirit, there is no room for oppression or domination of any sort. No room for ultra-bossy behavior. And should offenses occur, intentional or non-intentional, everyone in the community does their best to practice forgiveness, after of course putting a stop to any abusive behavior. Forgiveness is at the center of the Lord's Prayer, and the center of our Lord's teachings.

And the key to all these inclusive circle qualities is be sure we have a CHRIST-CENTERED circle, as followers of Jesus, our Christ. We confess, or are of the conviction, that Jesus walked this earth as the "fullness of God," full of grace and truth... For us, he is like the "face of God;" he is "The Way" that we best get to know God.

Yet we are never all alike, never cookie-cutter Christians. To the contrary: we will always be uniquely one-of-a-kind. We celebrate that with every baptism; Alaina Rae Fay will always be the only Alaina Rae Fay in the world. As followers of Jesus, we may be the same in heart, in love and grace and compassion, but we'll always be diverse in our skills and in our thinking. For example, there are many names for God, in the many faiths of the world, and in the Bible itself. We remember that Moses asked God's name, and heard the famous response "I am who I am" ... thus we get people calling God "The Great I Am." So many Jews nowadays just say "Adonai" meaning Lord, or "Ha Shem," meaning "The Name." God and Divine Spirit are truly beyond our understanding, and come to us as the

spirit of goodness and light, hope and peace, love and new life, as our opening song said. Fortunately, for those of us who follow Jesus, we have a particular focus for our faith: Christ, the center of our circle, our teacher, our Lord, our Savior. Jesus is the epitome of all that is good, gracious, and true, all that is divine; Scriptures say that in him the “fullness of God” was pleased to dwell. So we keep Jesus at the center of our circle, at the hub of the wheel.

As we approach Thanksgiving, we have a good goal as followers of Christ: Are we able to disagree civilly and peaceably? And if not, are we wise enough to know when to drop or avoid certain subjects? To be able to discuss anything peaceably, to have true dialogue without hostility is indeed a small miracle! It is the miracle of the Christ, who is able to “break down the dividing wall of hostility.” It is the Christ of understanding, the Christ of forgiveness... To forgive all is to understand all. It is to understand - that first of all we are all flawed human beings, with our limits, our mistakes, our weaknesses. To see that in everyone, starting with ourselves, is the beginning of compassion, of love for all. To see that we all need the forgiveness of God as extended in Christ is the beginning of an inclusive circle of love.

Let's come to this circle, over and over... like Alaina, baptized and growing in the spirit, and like the Lincolns, who will enter a new circle soon, a circle of Christ's inclusive love in a new community. In circles that have Christ at the center, there are no longer strangers, but always friends, fellow members of the household of God. So come to circle, and welcome new friends! Amen.