

Drawing Circles_by James E. Brenneman

Berkey Avenue Mennonite Church_June 12, 2016

Scripture Readings: Psalm 36: 5-10, Psalm 139:7-12 , Rom 8:38-39

Have you ever sat by a pond just as a few rain drops started to fall? There before our eyes we watch nature draw near perfect circles, rings rippling out from the center of the drop. From Apelles to Rembrandt to Picasso, it's been argued that no human is capable of drawing a perfect circle free-hand. Rembrandt painted a self-portrait with him standing between two circles as if to suggest otherwise. There are some examples on YouTube of people drawing near perfect circles, but always using their shoulder or elbow or wrist bone or a finger joint as if the center of a compass to do so.

Nature needs no practice, no pen and ink, and no compass to create near perfect circles or circles in general: Saturn's rings, the cross-section of a tree, the pupil of the human eye, the arc of a rainbow, the sun-disk rising each morning, setting each night.

There's something magical about the circle -- a perfectly balanced geometric pattern, symmetrical from any position, no corners -- made of a line with no beginning and no ending.

The ancients came to see the circle as a symbol of totality, wholeness, original perfection, eternity, timelessness -- a symbol of God!

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It's this expansive image of the circle, the symbol for God, for God's Ever-Presence and God's unlimited infinite love, that I hope will be the focus of our attention this morning.

All the biblical texts that were selected for our reflection this morning speak to this comprehensive, all-inclusive, ever Present nature of God and God's love.

Did the Psalmist say. . . "Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends only to the door of the temple; only to my house; only to our denomination; only as far as our particular national borders; only to the human species; only this far and no more.

No! The Psalmist audaciously, even scandalously, proclaims, "Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. . . you save *humans and animals* alike. . .*all* people take refuge in the shadow of your wings. . ." And this is the so-called OLD Testament folks!

Psalm 139 extends this amazing claim that there is absolutely no place on earth or in heaven (or in hell) where you and I can go and God's presence is not there already. The prophet Isaiah agrees (6:3): "the whole earth is filled with God's presence."

And finally, in the NT, the Apostle Paul reiterates (Rom 8:38-39): “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In other words, God is ever-present and God’s love is all-encompassing. There is an ancient Greek saying by Epedocles, later a favorite of St. Augustine, Pascal and the Jewish mystics (*Kabbalists*) that imagines God as “a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” So too, we can imagine God’s love as “a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”



But here then is the rub. We humans, being human, unable to master God’s finger painting circles in nature; unable to draw a circle so vast and inclusive, whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere -- we humans, since the beginning of time, have tended to draw on our cave walls pale images of the gigantic sun-disk; feeble moon-circles in our temples; mandalas in the sand, all efforts to symbolize God, present with us. The irony of drawing such sacred circles to express divine presence, perfection, and love -- by definition -- means that those very circles are also depictions of limits, boundaries, borders, partitions marking the inside from the outside. And inevitably what was meant to be a symbol of God’s infinite all-encompassing love become containers of love for those of us inside the circles whose circumference is designed by us.

We humans may not be all that good at drawing circles by hand, but we’ve become pretty good at drawing circles of the heart. We’re pretty good at drawing social circles by class, religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, political persuasion, national and denominational identities.

We seem have drawn so many circles within circles and circles overlapping other circles that keeping up with our real-life Venn-diagrams can be downright confusing. Exactly what little sliver of overlapping circles can now be called common ground? Or worse, we artificially gerrymander our circles so that fewer and fewer overlap *at all*. What a mess.



I find myself caught between the very real need to draw boundaries, distinctions, identity markers, belief systems -- for all the good reasons such bounded sets, particularities, and belief systems are important. We need coherence, I tell myself. Everyone else does it, so why not us? It’s just natural, human, healthy, even. We need comfort and care that only a circle can contain. Otherwise, our identities, our beliefs, our sense of selfhood, will simply leak out and drain away. That’s how I feel on the one hand.

On the other hand, I sense that the trajectory we seem to be on as people these days, or as a nation or denomination is tragic. Our politics, our social lives, our spiritual perspectives all seem to be increasingly polarized. And most sadly of all, we seem to be walling ourselves off from one another and also from God. How is this possible, when our biblical writers have such a wonderfully, all-inclusive vision of God and God's love as a circle of love whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere?

The ancient rabbis, in reading Psalm 36, and especially Ps 139, tell a story (midrash) that captures the paradox of our apparent need to draw ever smaller circles in contrast to the actual circle of God's love, God's salvation, God's presence whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere.

Once there was a woman\* named Honi, who wasn't particularly good at anything really. She tried cooking. Oy vey. Burnt everything. She tried weaving beautiful clothes and got caught in the loom. She tried to start a laundry-business. It went bankrupt. She tried her hand at figure drawing and painting, but could not draw a thing. Except. She could draw circles. She lamented and belittled herself that that was all she was good at: "drawing circles." Folks made fun of her lack of talent; "Crazy Honi the Drawer of Circles," they teased.

Well the craziest things began to happen. Every time she drew a circle in the sand and stood in it, all distractions ceased. She could stand there for hours. And every time, or so the Rabbis said, "the Holy One, blessed be Ha-Shem, would come out of hiding and enter Honi's small circumscribed world to meet her there." (Kushner, *Honey From the Rock*, 1990:49; \*Honi was a man in the original; I also embellished the story a bit.)

I love *that* account of Psalm 36 and 139 (Rom. 8). No matter Honi's giftedness or not, no matter our need for drawing circles for whatever reason or not, even when we draw our circles too small or for all the wrong reasons, we are left with the deeper truth that says, If God's presence is everywhere and God's love is all around and in between -- then there must be door knobs and entryways into our circle(s) for the Holy One, Blessed be *Hashem* (God's name), to enter.

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So what can we learn from Honi, the Crazy Drawer of Circles and from today's Scripture readings? Let me suggest two lessons, one for us personally and one for us as a Mennonite/Anabaptist Communion.

First, to each one of us, personally. No one would suggest that drawing appropriate circles, setting good personal and psychological boundaries, can be a healthy thing to do for good self-care and protection.

However, sometimes we also draw too small of circles that stifle our imaginations or squash our flexibility to dream big thoughts. Sometimes we draw not just one circle of

protection around us, but 2, 3, 4 or more circles around us because of past bad experiences, or bitterness, or pain or sickness or FEAR.

In all cases of drawing such circles around us personally, for reasons healthy or not, the story of Honi, the lessons of the Psalms, and of St. Paul's letter to the Romans, tell us that the circle of God's presence and love is a circle without a center, whose circumference is nowhere -- its high and deep and far and wide, so that *inside and outside* our many and varied circles, we can be assured that God is with us and God's steadfast (gracious) love embraces us. Period.



Let me move from the personal individual focus now and draw our attention just a bit on an area of concern I have for our Mennonite Church (USA) these days.

I have no doubt that healthy congregations, conferences, and denominations need to draw circles of identity, distinction, doctrine, belief, and belonging.

Having said that, if the Psalmist and St. Paul is right about how inclusive, all-embracing, and ever-present, the steadfast love of God is for all of creation, human and non-human, for the whole universe of heavens and earths, then is it not imperative that we too should try as best we can to draw circles of love and inclusion that approximate the circle of God's love, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere?

In point of fact, this can never ultimately happen. We are human, not God. However, let me suggest one example of how I might apply today's lesson to the Anabaptist/Mennonite Church writ large.

Let me say first that we simply *cannot* hope to exist as a denomination (now 75,000 members small), if we keep making the circle of belief and practice ever smaller and smaller -- this amounts to a slow death by division.

I am very grateful that the delegate body of MCUSA at our last convention tried to draw the circle of inclusion a bit larger, one that would include forbearance for those disagreeing with each other, on the one hand, while trying to simultaneously, uphold the current teaching and practice of the church as articulated by the 24 articles in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.

Sadly, we are seeing come to pass, however, the prophecy of the poet Yeats in his poem "The Second Coming," where he writes, "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Well, things haven't gotten quite that apocalyptic yet, but it does seem 'the center cannot hold' much longer in our church (MCUSA) at the rate we are subdividing and redrawing our circles of inclusion ever smaller week by week.

The delegates invited us to consider over the course of the next biennium (and, perhaps two), whether we could, in effect, find overlap between the circle of forbearance and the circle drawn by the 24 articles of our current Confession of Faith that might keep us together as a community.

One suggestion we Presidents of Mennonite Colleges and Universities suggested in an Open Letter to the church a month ago would be for our delegates to consider a reduction in the number of articles in the Confession from 24 to 7, the seven "Shared Convictions of the Mennonite World Conference." Those seven shared convictions have wonderfully drawn a large enough circle that includes multiple Anabaptist denominations with a whole variety of differing worship styles, cultural origins, interpretations of Scripture and histories. It truly is an amazingly, generous, circle of God's steadfast love.

Any sociologist or anthropologist could tell us, drawing 24 (concentric) circles around any group of people, makes it almost impossible to get into such a group from the outside in. And almost as hard to keep those inside believing and practicing the whole batch of beliefs, do's and don'ts -- all the time "swatting gnats and swallowing camels," Jesus called it. In Jesus' day, his believing community had 613 laws (concentric circles forming a "hedge" of belief and practice) around them. Jesus argued that all of those 613 circles should be reduced to 2: Love God and Love Others. Period.

From that vantage point, my suggestion for the articles of the Confession to be reduced from 24 to 7 (7 that work well!!) seems downright tame. The overall trajectory is from many to as few as possible, and then let local congregations, conferences, denominations work out the details on a case by case basis. Why seven? Why not two, like Jesus suggests? Well, we're only human.

For a people (a church) whose origins grow out of narrow circles drawn by church-state systems; for a people who were persecuted as heretics and blasphemers beyond the bounded set of beliefs and practices of the 16th century churches of that time -- we of all people should be able to draw circles of inclusion big enough and wide enough to include excluded others.

Let us pray and work and pray some more until we too can draw a circle of God's steadfast love whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere because God's love knows no bounds, God's presence has no limits.

Let me leave you with a poetic stanza of Edwin Markham, often called the poet of democracy, from his poem "Outwitted." Though applied to drawing national boundaries, his poem can also affirm the extent of God's steadfast love for we Drawers of Circles, all:

He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in !

She drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took her in !

-- Amen.