

June 21, 2015
Falcon Heights Church UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

Fourth Sunday in Pentecost
Mark 2:13-17
Galatians 3:28-29

REFLECTIONS ON VALUING INCLUSIVITY

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 that took him in!

(“Outwitted,” by Edwin Markham, 1852-1940)

I have long delighted in this short poem by the American poet Edwin Markham. It has always reminded me of the inclusivity that I experienced as a young teenager at Rock Spring Congregational UCC Church in Arlington, VA. I was a self-avowed atheist in middle school, and told my mother I would not be participating in our congregation’s confirmation class. “Well, young lady,” my sly mother replied, “I think you should be able to explain *why* you are an atheist, so you will be attending the class.” And I did, and in spite of the fact that I “drew a circle to “shut (my congregation) out,” and chose not to be confirmed at that point, my pastor “had the wit to win” and “drew a circle that took (me) in.”

In identifying “inclusive” and “inclusivity” as a value in this congregation, I sense you are doing much the same thing. Many of you have told me that you seek to draw a wide circle, especially for people who have experienced non-inclusion, even overt rejection, in other churches or religious traditions. Diversity of theological views has been important since the founding of this church and is outlined in your church Constitution as “freedom to interpret God’s Truth as God gives each of (you) light and wisdom.” For many of you, racial, political, sexual orientation and economic inclusivity are critical components to your vitality as a congregation. One would hope that your inclusivity in all of those regards would have no limits. To always have the love and wit to draw the larger circle that includes all people: this is a profound vision and a tender hope for many churches.

But when I chose Markham’s poem to print on the front of our worship bulletin today, it was over a week ago. It was before I left of vacation on the West coast, and days before Wednesday night’s shootings in Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The awful irony for me is that this AME Bible Study group, in which an elected state official was assassinated and eight other African American people were murdered, also “drew a circle that took him in,” as the poem describes. They didn’t know the young, quiet white man who asked to be part of their mid-week study group; he was a stranger in their midst. He was welcomed into the circle of conversation, scripture reading and prayer. He sat with them for an hour, before beginning to spout his racist accusations

about blacks raping women and taking over the country, and finally pulling out a gun and shooting. All in a faith community, the place where any of us, and I would say particularly for African Americans in this country, hope to feel most welcomed, most safe, most included. And within a particular faith community, a church founded by those who planned a slave revolt in the early 1800's and that local whites later burned to the group. This church has been a potent symbol of the struggle with discrimination and violence against blacks in our country. It seem hardly a random choice by someone intent on a hate-driven act meant to intimidate and terrorize the wider African American community. There, a circle of inclusion shattered by an act of terrorism made possible by the realities of ongoing racism, increasingly popular white supremism, and escalating gun violence. How do we understand the value of inclusion, of inclusivity, in a world where some ideas, some prejudices, anti-Gospel values, should NOT be made welcome?

Today we are exploring the value of inclusion, of inclusivity as it relates to our congregation. So much of Christianity has been defined by who and what the Church as a dominant power has excluded: Jews from full citizenship, women from leadership, people of color from the building, the LGBT community from being who they are and loving who they love. I rejoice that our wider denomination, of which this church is part, has a history of inclusive "firsts." We are the first Protestant denomination to ordain an African American pastor in in 1785, a woman pastor in 1853 and a gay pastor in 1972.

Jesus was constantly reaching out to those who were excluded in his culture. Lepers, women, those who worked directly with the occupying Romans, those deemed sinners by his own Jewish tradition. He was always moving "out front" on this inclusion of the marginalized and rejected. And frankly that, is where the ideal of being inclusive may be hardest for us. It is very difficult to truly embrace the wide diversity of people that cross our paths these days. While those in younger generations find increasing diversity in the workplace and in their children's schools to be the norm, this has not been so for previous generations. Older generations, in congregations I have served, usually experienced young adulthood and family-raising during a time when Christianity was the assumed norm in our communities. These post World War II years were defined by a sense of civic cohesiveness, nuclear families with stay-at-home moms and working dads. Most everyone at the grocery, at work, at schools or department stores, at church, looked like you, and celebrated the same holidays as you. To be part of a congregation that is more vocally inclusive of people different than one's own family or the people we socialize with can feel challenging. I have served churches that did not want to perform same-gender weddings for fear of becoming the "gay church," whatever that was supposed to mean. And I am aware that people have left this Opening and Affirming Congregation due to negative comments about gay and lesbian people, overhead in the restroom and even spoken face-to-face. Hard to hear, isn't it? A certain pride, and insistence on "color blindness" may be expressed in a congregation that includes a few people of color. But seriously exploring one's

own privilege as a white person, as was the topic of our Minnesota Conference Annual meeting last week, is much more daunting. Hearing the news about Charleston and having to face our own quiet complicity in a nation that continues to tolerate harassment, discrimination and violence towards people of color is very disturbing and perplexing. Such are the challenges of saying: We value inclusivity.

As I hear Jesus words from the Gospel of Mark, I am struck by his willingness to approach Levi, a man working in his tax booth collecting taxes for the Roman Empire. This was considered an “unclean” profession by the Jewish community, where one would be ritually impure because of his work with the occupying Gentile army and contact with this person would make you “unclean.” Jesus continues pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable by eating at Levi’s house, along with other tax collectors and sinners. All very inclusive and this gravely troubles the holy law scholars, the Pharisees. But the manner in which Jesus replies has an exclusive ring to it that we may find a bit surprising. “Why do you eat with these people and make yourself ritually unfit?” the Pharisees ask. Jesus replies that he hasn’t come for those who are in no need of a “physician.” “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” I am reminded of other places where our inclusive Jesus sounds increasingly exclusive: no one enters, participates in the Kingdom of Heaven, God’s reign of justice and compassion on earth, unless he or she becomes like a little child. On another occasion, Jesus is approached by a rich young man who wants to know how to be part of God’s reign. Jesus eyes him steadily and says “sell all you have and give it to the poor.” Jesus knows the priority that holds this man back; Jesus senses what rules the man’s heart. Jesus invites him to open to changing this priority of riches and embracing the possibility of abundant life in the present. The man sighs and walks away. Excluded not from some future place in heaven, mind you, but choosing self-exclusion from fully participating in abundant life now.

We hear the words of the Apostle Paul, where he widens the circle of just who is included in the notion of “the people of God.” His own inner transformation, as he encountered the forgiving spirit of the living Christ, compelled him to expand the circle of traditional Judaism of his day. He set aside former understandings of his own Scriptures to boldly include those outside the circle: Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, male and female, he writes – all are considered “as one” in Christ Jesus. We too have set aside former assumptions based on Scripture about people of color and the LGBT community, all for the greater good of serving this Gospel of inclusion.

Here is the huge challenge for a congregation such as ours, in my view: Our high-minded intent to be inclusive is going to become increasingly challenging as our surrounding culture continues to diversify. Coming to worship and participating in the programs of this place will entail getting to know and understand people who are increasingly different from us. You will try to do this within a wider culture that is increasingly fearful about those who are different than us, and tells us we need to protect ourselves from those who would destroy

our lifestyle and values. But I believe this focus on inclusivity will become the source of your renewed vitality and faithfulness as a faith community. Paradoxically, the Gospel message claims that we will be able to truly be inclusive in the way of Jesus, only by excluding ideas and behaviors that limit inclusivity! No one can change your inner attitudes, but this church can no longer tolerate anti-gay comments. If you hear anti-gay comments around here, say something! No one can force anyone else's beliefs, but we can hold ourselves accountable to Kingdom behavior of welcome and respect. You can hold yourselves accountable to ways of being with one another that lovingly challenge prejudices and encourage our inner transformation into the mind of Christ. We can hold ourselves accountable to acting in ways that persistently push this congregation to take public stands against the dehumanization of certain people.

I close with these words of the United Church of Christ Biblical scholar, Walter Bruggemann, who has written this about inclusivity:

“A bent toward inclusion runs great risks, but they are risks faithful to the gospel. In the long run such risks serve the kingdom. In the short run, they are the requirements of fidelity among us.”

May we be faithful to God and to one another in this on-going work of inclusivity. Amen.

Notes: Walter Bruggemann, from an article written in response to the UCC “God is Still Speaking – Ejector Ad.”
(http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/19865/the-ejector-brueggemann.pdf?1418446509)