

"Draw the Circle Wide" **Ephesians 2:11-22**

"2 pastors for 4 churches!"

As you know, Juhee has an additional church to serve starting this July. So Juhee and I are now serving four churches. One of my clergy friends now serves three churches. Some pastors even serve four churches. United Methodist clergy have often served more than one congregation at a time since the beginning of American Methodism.

Have you heard about Methodist circuit riders? [ppt] In the early American colonies, most areas were sparsely populated and preachers needed to cover large areas. These regions were called 'preaching circuits' and *Methodist preachers rode on horseback as they traveled this preaching circuit*. Some preaching circuits were so large that it would take 5 to 6 weeks to cover them. *As American settlement expanded toward the west, the preaching circuits for circuit riders grew wider and wider* and so Methodist circuit riders were always on the move.

Francis Asbury was one such circuit rider. He said, "We must reach every section of America, especially the raw frontiers. We must not be afraid of men, devils, wild animals, or disease. Our motto must always be FORWARD!" (Francis Asbury) *Asbury traveled over 270,000 miles on horseback and preached over 16,000 sermons.*

Do you know the song, "*Draw the Circle Wide*?" Let us sing this song together. *The phrase, "Draw the Circle Wide" is meant to be a blessing for church growth and encouragement for circuit riders.* Because of their dedication and sacrifice for the good news, Methodism grew into the largest Protestant denomination during this period in the United States. I believed that we need to restore this early spirit of Methodism.

Paul, the Circuit Rider, and the problems within the early church

There are many notable circuit riders, but I believe Apostle Paul was the first circuit rider in church history. [map picture] As you can see here on Paul's missionary journey map, how Paul's mission circuit grew wider and wider. It was a blessing for him to see the church grow and people turn to Christ, but as the circle grew wider and wider, the early church also began to encounter problems.

The main problem arose from divisions between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. Jesus and his followers were Jews but the life-giving gospel was so powerful and dynamic that it could not be contained within an ethnic boundary. As Paul proclaimed the gospel to the Gentiles, and many joined the church.

However, the Jews and the Gentiles were separated by a violent history. For Jews, the Gentiles were invaders who took their land and destroyed their holy temple in Jerusalem. Most of the Jewish Christians were skeptical about the idea of converting Gentiles into Christians at the time. Jewish Christians disagreed that Gentiles could become followers of Christ without following the Mosaic Law or being circumcised. Because of this painful history as well as the different cultural backgrounds, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were divided by mutual hostility and distrust even after they became Christians.

This problem of the early church is not so foreign to us. Just like our divided society, the church is racially and culturally divided. A few decades ago, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." It's still true. African Americans gather in African American churches. Koreans go to Korean Churches, and

Anglo-Americans go to Anglo-American churches. Diverse political and social issues divide the church today.

Division within Us!

In fact, our beloved United Methodist church is facing a division. In *a clash between tradition and changing cultural norms* over human sexuality, Methodists are divided. I remember the 2020 New England annual conference. A few conservative United Methodist churches disaffiliated from the conference due to their disagreement on human sexuality and *for the sake of their conscience*. This year, a few progressive United Methodist churches disaffiliated from the conference because they feel that the United Methodist church is still hurting and hasn't done enough justice work for LGBTQI members. They chose to leave the conference for the sake of justice and their conscience. I know that sometimes, separation and division are an inevitable choice for justice and the well-being of the oppressed. But sometimes, I feel that we, Methodists choose separation because it seems an easy solution. We prefer to be with people who are similar to us, who think like us and act like us. Instead of drawing the circle wider, we build a dividing wall.

We must remember that Jesus Christ came to break down dividing walls. Jesus is like a wrecking ball that destroys walls between groups. Paul reminds us this truth.

"Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it." (verse 13-16)

Christ didn't come for particular groups or people who fit his purpose. Rather, Christ came to bring everyone near God by his blood on the cross. He took redemptive suffering for the sake of others. He revealed God's unconditional and boundless love to humanity through his sacrificial love. Like a wrecking ball, his love destroyed all dividing walls and proclaimed peace to us, making former enemies families in him. Only through this love that breaks all walls, can the church be rebuilt and revitalized.

"Draw the Circle Wide" Welcoming Church

[ppt] Do you know who she is? Or can you guess what she does for living? She is Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber. She is a pastor of the [Evangelical Lutheran Church of America](#). She is also a three-time New York Times bestselling author. I know that she doesn't look like a typical pastor. Her life and path to ministry have not been ordinary. She said, "I started getting tattoos at 17. In the mid-80's, there were not a lot of underage girls getting tattoos, only the super-trashy ones." She became an alcoholic and drug abuser in college and soon dropped out of college. She often felt like one of "society's outsiders." After 10 years of struggling with addiction, she became sober in 1996. She heard her call to ministry in 2004 when she was asked to eulogize a friend who had committed suicide. She was ordained in 2008.

Because she experienced first-hand living as a substance abuser and a social misfit, her church, the House for All Sinners and Saints, in Denver, Colorado is very welcoming to people with drug addictions, depression, and even those who are not believers of her faith. They do not judge people, but accept them as they are and become companions on their journey of transformation.

Pastor Nadia said, "God loves you now, not just after you start making better decisions. Sometimes just knowing that is a step toward making better decisions." The church is the house for all sinners who make bad decisions and mistakes. But the church is also the house of all Saints who strive to make better decisions... for holy living. The foundation of the church is God's unconditional love for us. We are loved not because we are worthy to be loved. Rather we are worthy because we are loved by God. Under her leadership, the church has grown to about 500 people.

She said, "If you want people to be evangelistic in their faith, there's nothing that has to happen other than having a community in which human transformation happens. If you have a community in which human transformation happens, people very naturally talk about that." When the church is a community where human transformation occurs, people naturally gather to the church.

We want more people to come to church. We want to revitalize our church. Right? But we don't know how. I believed that God is telling us how today. We need to draw our circle wide. We need to draw our circle wide. As Christ broke down the division between people through his self-giving love on the cross, break the walls that divide us from those who seem different from us, and redraw the circle wide.

Don't be a wall builder. Rather be a wrecking ball of love! Draw the circle wide. Welcome everyone, the sober and the alcoholic, citizen and non-citizen, homeless and depressed, gay and straight, sinners and saints. Welcome everyone. Through self-giving love, draw the circle wide. Draw the circle wide until everyone is in the circle of God's love. Amen.