

Preached by Susan Hall
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
February 15, 2009 – Presbyterian Women Sunday

Psalm 147
Isaiah 56:6-8
Ephesians 2:12–19

IN THE CIRCLE

Let us pray: Good morning God! We are here hoping that *we* are *in* your circle, that we are included. Please help us to know that everyone belongs in the circle and help us to remember to reach out our hands to include everyone. AMEN

I saw a great sermon the other day. It was one that some of you also, may have *seen*. The best sermon I saw recently happened during children's time. It was the day the children's message was "It is not your size that matters for even the smallest ones can have the greatest value"

Anyone remember that day?

The example given was using coins, you know, how even though the dime is the smallest coin, it has more value than the larger sized penny or even bigger sized nickel.

Well, when, the teacher of the children's lesson said, "Let's pray, let's hold hands and pray", the day's sermon began for me. At THAT moment, the real lesson began to anyone who was watching.

A small girl reached out her hand to an older boy and they readily clasped hands. Then, the older boy pulled back and reached his hand out wider. The girl looked around, kind of behind her, and saw that there was a younger boy who was holding his hands deep in his lap.

The older boy and girl waved their hands at him, but he shyly didn't move. So they re-clasped hands and looked at each other. The younger boy fluttered his hands a moment and then, started scooting even further from the circle. I guess he felt he was in the way.

The two children with clasped hands immediately let go and quickly grabbed the young boy's hands, pulling him toward the circle. They reshaped the circle so now everyone was *IN*side. A soft smile was shared by all three and they joined in the already started prayer.

As I listened to the choir sing while the children dispersed down to the nursery, I started thinking about what I saw and thought:

- How often do we see someone on the outside of our already formed, comfortable circle and we turn a blind eye, refusing to let go of our security to reach out and include them?
- How often do we ignore someone truly in need of a friend or a hand up?
- How often do we avoid even a short interaction with someone because we have to inconvenience ourselves for a few minutes?

That short children's prayer took less than a minute. So I bet some of you are wondering why I am making such a big deal about this. Big deal, some little kid doesn't get to hold hands during one of 50-some prayers the children do upfront every year.

Big Deal! — Yeah, it is a big deal.

That simple touch of hands was the difference between someone feeling part of the group, feeling loved, and another tender soul being left out in the cold.

Jesus brought all sorts of people into his circle. He knew that all people should be included, even the people that others said didn't belong. Jesus touched people that had been classified as untouchable—like lepers. He stepped in to protect people who had already been condemned—like the adulterous woman. Jesus dined with people branded as heartless and greedy—tax collectors. He sat and talked with those considered unworthy—there are examples of them throughout the Bible.

But us, what do we do? Somewhere in our growing up, we lost our beautiful, unthinking acceptance of the people around us. We stopped inviting the person who sat next to us to be our new best friend.

I know some folks do present a challenge for most of us. Walking home in the darkening evening, it's hard to feel safe striking up a conversation with a roughly dressed fellow traveling the same sidewalk. Likewise, it can be more than a little unsettling to stop the car and ask a homeless person what they need to get through the cold night.

However, most of the people we cross paths with, most of the people who are just outside our *comfortable* circle, actually, are quite average, not evil, not threatening. They may dress differently or have a different set of priorities, but for the most part, are very similar to us. We just put up a wall between us and them.

Often, we listen to the labels that gossip puts on others and treat people as if those false labels actually have meaning.

We only talk to the *cool* kids at school, the *favored* people in the office, the neighbors whose yard or actions *conform* to the expected norm.

Even the people we cross paths with for just a moment, we instantaneously, make negative judgments on them based on looks, instead of seeing people with Jesus' heart.

We build up an idea of what these people are thinking, what they might do to us, or what they may ask of us, and make the decision to shun them before we ever touch any truth.

This is truly unfortunate because not only do we miss out on being Jesus' hands that reach out to pull everyone into the circle, but we miss out on the blessings, the smiles that including all of Jesus' children can bring.

So, I ask you to reconsider how you form your circle.

We are all outcasts—just outside someone else's IN circle. Perhaps, if each of us swallowed our fears, opened our hearts, and extended our hands to others outside our comfort zone, everyone would have at least one circle of love in their world. And if we worked to make our circles big enough, there might even be just one big circle with everyone, Jesus' circle.

Amen.