

Circles of love

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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.

—Edwin Markham, *The Shoes of Happiness, and Other Poems*, 1913

I was a young teen when I first came across Edwin Markham's simple poem and memorized it.

I lived in a world of tightly drawn circles: economic, racial, social, religious. There were staircases in my school that were dangerous to walk down; rules about who to say "hi" to and who to ignore. Smoke from the fires of the Bronx was visible from my bedroom window, a grim reminder of an angry, inequitable world.

I walked a tightrope between circles. Although our home was in the "rich" part of town, I wore hand-me-down clothes and dragged a shopping cart down the hill to the nearest grocery store.

I grew up with the "white" kids, but my last name (Capra) and coloring (basic brown) linked me to a group still marginalized by the wealthy WASP community. "Wop" and "dago" were words still in use, whispered epithets strong enough to spark an after-school fight or a sudden, permanent exclusion.

The church of my childhood offered a wider range of racial and social strata but drew tight lines on behavior, theology, gender. Easy enough to fall outside the lines by asking an unendorsed question.

Life today is in some ways different, in some ways depressingly the same. There are other racial groups held to the fringes, other, equally inexplicable points of division that mark the boundaries of our turf.

Miroslav Volf explores this world of exclusionary circles in *Exclusion and Embrace*, a book well worth reading. Descriptions of the book offer this summary:

Life at the end of the twentieth century presents us with a disturbing reality. Otherness, the simple fact of being different in some way, has come to be defined as in and of itself evil . . .

Increasingly we see that exclusion has become the primary sin, skewing our perceptions of reality and causing us to react out of fear and anger to all those who are not within our (ever-narrowing) circle. . .

Exclusion happens, Volf argues, wherever impenetrable barriers are set up that prevent a creative encounter with the other. It is easy to assume that “exclusion” is the problem or practice of “barbarians” who live “over there,” but Volf persuades us that exclusion is all too often our practice “here” as well. Modern western societies, including American society, typically recite their histories as “narratives of inclusion,” and Volf celebrates the truth in these narratives. But he points out that these narratives conveniently omit certain groups who “disturb the integrity of their ‘happy ending’ plots.” Therefore such narratives of inclusion invite “long and gruesome” counter-narratives of exclusion—the brutal histories of slavery and of the decimation of Native American populations come readily to mind, but more current examples could also be found.

Circles of exclusion are obvious and everywhere, with sharply defined boundaries, vehement defense. I still find myself walking the edges, no longer convinced of Markham’s blithe belief that “Love and I had the wit to win.”

There are moments when I can see the walls melting away, short seasons of shalom when I catch glimpses of blessed unity. Then, even in places where unity should be most possible, the walls go up again, the circles draw in tighter.

The depth of our dividedness baffles me. How can I love my enemy when that enemy deflects every overture of interest, denies any possible middle ground, demands agreement on an endless list of positions (political, theological, economic) before discussion can begin?

To continue quoting from the description of Volf’s book:

Most proposed solutions to the problem of exclusion have focused on social arrangements: what kind of society ought we to create in order to accommodate individual or communal difference?

Volf describes the "universalist," minimizing differences and promoting common values; the "communitarian," celebrating difference and promoting heterogeneity; the "postmodernist," proclaiming the radical autonomy of every individual. Then he explains:

These proposals . . . entail important perspectives about persons who live in societies, but their main interest is not social agents, but social arrangements. In contrast, I want to concentrate on social agents. Instead of reflecting on the kind of society we ought to create in order to accommodate individual or communal heterogeneity, I will explore what kind of selves we need to be in order to live in harmony with others. My assumption is that selves are situated; they are female or male, Jew or Greek, rich or poor - as a rule, more than one of these things at the same time...often having hybrid identities...and sometimes migrating from one identity to another. The questions I will be pursuing about such situated selves are: How should they think of their identity? How should they relate to the other? How should they go about making peace with the other? . . .(20-21)

The will to give ourselves to others and 'welcome' them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity. The will to embrace precedes any 'truth' about others and any construction of their 'justice'. This will is absolutely indiscriminate and strictly immutable; it transcends the moral mapping of the social world into 'good' and 'evil'." (Volf, 1996, p. 29).

Volf's discussion challenges me on many levels. He offers a compelling vision of embrace of the enemy, and the possibility of that embrace in light of God's forgiveness. Volf offers a summary of his view:

I'm intrigued by the notion of love of the enemy as a way to return the other back to the good, and I find myself repeatedly drawn to the question of "what kind of selves we need to be in order to live in harmony with others."

Yet—even Jesus himself, shalom incarnate, did not live in harmony with all during his time on earth.

There’s something in Volf's discussion that reminds me of Markham’s poem: “Love and I had the wit to win.” Volf’s situated self extends the embrace, negotiates peace, draws the new, larger circle. I'm no longer sure that's possible.

I find my thoughts turning to a painting that comes closer to my own experience. The artist who created it, Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937), knew first-hand the challenge of conflicting circles: so light-skinned he could “pass,” yet legally defined as “Negro.” Son of a minister and bishop in the AME church, and of a woman born into slavery. An American who could only experience freedom and opportunity as an expatriate in Paris. A man of deep faith in a dismissive milieu.

His middle name, “Ossawa,” was an abbreviation of Osawatomie, the town in Kansas where John Brown and his men raided and killed several supporters of slavery.

The painting that draws me is Daniel in the Lion’s Den.



Daniel and the Lions, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1896, Paris

At first glance, there’s no love in this painting. Daniel is captive, bound, imprisoned, in danger.

As are the lions: held against their will, in a world not of their choosing.

Despite the tension between them, they are embraced by light, enmity silenced by a will and grace, beyond them.

And in the light that holds them, there's a hint of something more, a whisper of fellowship, or concern, between Daniel and the lion nearest him.

When I think of loving my enemy, that's the image that comes to mind: attentive, submissive, intending no harm, willing to will the other's good, but not yet able to make that happen.

Bound by my own perspective, I am not yet capable of embracing those able to harm me.

Enough, maybe, to stand beside them, unafraid, acknowledging their perspective as well as my own, affirming their place in the circle of light, knowing I am not the one who draws the wider circle.

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