

Circle of Caring
John 17:20-23
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General Assembly 2009

It took place a year ago May in Congo – just near the geographical Equator, where north literally meets south. Nine Hoosier Disciples were in the Mbandaka District of the Disciples Church in Congo. It was a “get acquainted” visit that would culminate in a formal partnership between Mbandaka and Indiana Disciples.

On Saturday, we boarded dug-out canoes (two large ones lashed together and powered by an outboard motor, with room enough for each of us to be comfortably seated on chairs.) The day’s purpose? To visit Disciples congregations accessible only by river. To exchange greetings and gifts. To acknowledge each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Church folk met us as we docked at each village. They were smiling and singing and dancing. We climbed up into churches built on stilts, located as they were so close to the water. In our first village of the day, Pastor Okaillehe and wife, Julienne, met us with babe in arms . . . their own child, Henock, who was to be dedicated that day by their regional minister, Pastor Ilumbe. But in an act of partnership grace, Rev. Ilumbe turned to his American counterpart, Rick Spleth, and invited Rev. Spleth to do the honors.

Rick took that sweet baby in his arms and placed a hand on his head and prayed a familiar prayer of infant dedication. A prayer of thanksgiving for this precious life, for the family that welcomes this child, a prayer of promise on behalf of his congregation to be there in support of the parents as they raise him up right – to make his own confession of faith in Christ Jesus one day.

And we were there, nine Disciples from Indiana, USA, along with Henock’s parents and congregation, together standing as church family – extended family, to be sure, but family – blessing that child who is not just a child of those parents, not just a child of the Congo; but child of the whole human family, created by God in the image of God.

God’s child. Our child.

Just two nights ago, we started this assembly with creation, marveling at the deep spiritual truth of those ancient stories – including the witness that in the eyes of God all of humanity is one family. Descended as from one set of cosmic parents, given one abundant creation to tend – one garden of Eden where there is enough for all.

Some of you, like me, may have some training in the social science of economics. In economics, we learn that the world is characterized by scarcity – that humanity’s project is to manage that scarcity.

But in Genesis 1 and 2 we see the world created by God, to be a world of plenty, a world of abundance. So abundant, in fact, that the project of humanity is to help bring that proliferating abundance under control. We read:

27 So God created humankind in [God’s own] image . . . 28 God blessed them, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth . . . and subdue it.

The fundamental assumption of economics says “scarcity”. God’s book of Genesis says “abundance”. More than enough to feed each child, to educate each child, to house each child– more than enough to eradicate malaria entirely from the face of the earth (as we are poised to do before too many more General Assemblies roll around,) more than enough to provide paid for health care for all God’s children.

Scarcity? Or Abundance? The economists’ word? Or God’s word.

In our biological families we tend to live out of the “more than enough” mindset already – even when we don’t realize it. How many times have you or your parents said, “We were poor but we didn’t know it!” Within the family circle connected by blood, intimacy, culture and work, the resources available to us – though often not excessive – are multiplied in their effect. They become more than enough. As we share resources – within the family – our personal experience of satisfaction, wealth, happiness is increased.

According to the book of Genesis – whether we’re born in Indiana or India, San Francisco or Sao Paulo, Chicago or China – all of us on this planet are one human family. That child of Congo – Henock – is our child – and there is more than enough for all of us within the family circle.

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Henock is our child, too, because of Jesus’ prayer that we read just a few minutes ago.

See how the prayer unfolds. Jesus is in that upper room. Supper is finished. Eleven of the Twelve are there (and a few others who have bought and prepared and served the meal.) Jesus has been telling them what is to come, about his “glory” – when the presence of God in him will shine forth visibly.

Just before they are to leave and go to his betrayal, Jesus dedicates the disciples, commissioning them for the work ahead. But not just them. . .

20 ¶ “I ask,” says Jesus, “not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Each line of the prayer extends the circle of care. Jesus and God, one with each other, extending to the circle of these disciples. Then to the 3000 people who will hear Peter preach on Pentecost, then to those who will hear as Paul and the other early evangelists risk ship wreck and beatings and arrest spreading the word through Asia Minor, and North Africa, and India – throughout the Roman Empire and beyond –

And eventually to us, in ever widening circles of care – that we may all be one. And why? So the world may know – that God loves them.

Jesus’ prayer is that we all be one. The child Henock is our child through Jesus’ prayer.

God’s child. Our child.

The question tonight is: Now what?

Well - - - that’s where the church comes in! The “now what” question is where the church can shine!

Let’s look back at Jesus’ prayer. He said:

22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one . . .

Glory. . . !?

Remember: Jesus is about to go out to the garden of Gethsemane.

Gethsemane today is in East Jerusalem, a fenced-in garden with ancient, truly ancient, gnarled old olive trees amid carefully tended, raked garden paths. And next to the garden is a grand old cathedral with high, vaulted ceilings and cold, stone walls. Surprisingly, though – translucent stone walls.

Standing inside the church, the outside light of the sun shines in. Through the apparently opaque and yet actually translucent stone of purple and mauve and ivory alabaster, the light shines.

(So that’s how alabaster cities gleam!)

How appropriate for Jesus’ prayer: that the glory of God would shine in us!

We are not defined by closed, private, opaque gray walls, but by translucent, even transparent, circles of care. Can the glory of Christ shine through us? Can Jesus, the light that darkness cannot overcome, blaze in us? Can the glory that Jesus prays for – radiate forth from our lives?

The church says, “Yes!”

Church is where God's intention is proclaimed – and lived, where people can experience a genuine sense of interconnection with real people both near and far. In church we practice a way of life that makes all the world, including the people on the Congo River, part of our circle of care.

So open that we no longer know the difference between us and them, between my family and your family, between this neighborhood and that. Functioning as a single circle of care, one human family, created in the image of God, glorified and shining bright with the light of God's love made known to you and me through generations of those who heard through the word of Jesus' disciples after he commissioned them there in that upper room to rediscover their original oneness as created originally by God in creation – one human family in the likeness of one God.

Many but one, Diverse but undivided.

Ever widening the circle, shining with the glory of God's love through the boundaries and barriers of the world, sharing the abundance of life that Jesus promised. Caring for each other as for family.

Yes!

So now what?

"The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning," says ecumenist Emil Brunner. "Let Christian unity be our polar star," urges Barton Stone. The focused light of the Polar star. Burning bright with the unity of Christ. One for the sake of the world, for the healing of the nations!

Can we care that much?

Can we be that vulnerable to each other?

When we extend our circle from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth – to become true family with all God's children, a certain vulnerability does enter the picture. We find, like Copernicus and Galileo found, staring into the universe, that we are not the center anymore. Or not the only center. On a round globe each one of us is a central point with circles radiating out from us. . .

Standing in Henock's village church, by the Congo River, we were standing in one of Planet Earth's great tropical forests, the lungs of the earth. All those trees giving off oxygen, life-supporting oxygen. Little Henock and his Disciples Community of Congo have had the fortune to be born there. By accident of birth – or providence of birth – they are stewards of that life-giving part of the world.

We are part of their wider circle. But in the world that revolves around them, the challenge of stewarding that great forest is, definitely, a challenge. There is tremendous stress on the world's resources, threatening that forest, not because there is too little stuff in the world, but because we want too much.

I have just learned that my own energy-use pattern in my house, where I hardly even live because I travel so much, uses the same energy as three cars! Worse than average in my neighborhood. It's clear – if I love Henock – I need to quit being such an energy hog!

So – now what? How vulnerable can I be? How warm in summer and cool in winter, how much less hot water, fewer electrical appliances can I use? How much of Henock's reality can I let in to my awareness everyday? And be guided by it? Because we are family, united in a circle of care. Because Henock, no less than me, deserves a life of abundance, including a share of earth's material abundance.

See, the scarcity with which Henock lives may be normal in a world defined by economists, but is not acceptable in the abundant world defined by Genesis. Whatever the economists may say, it's not God's normal that the children in Henock's congregation go until six o'clock at night without food while their parents work their fingers to the bone to bring home that one meal.

It's not normal, and it's not right. And if Henock is truly my child, if his family is my family, I know it's not right, and – now what? – now I have to do something about it.

If that little baby is a stranger half way around the world, I don't have to care. But if he's my little brother, Henock, I do. And he is my little brother, and he is yours. And how I live as a Hoosier is

inescapably connected to the life of Disciples on the Congo River. And how Congolese are able to care for their forests will inevitably affect how Americans are able to continue a happy way of life.

Einstein, of all people, said over half a century ago:

"A human being is part of the whole called by us universe . . . We experience ourselves . . . as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us . . . to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. . . "

Einstein concludes: *"We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if humanity is to survive."*¹

Church! We have that way of thinking! It's in God's imprint on creation. It's in the glory shining forth from us through Jesus' prayer. It is in the vision of wholeness that we bring by the grace of God into this fragmented world. A vision that takes us out of the prison of ourselves and widens into a global circle of care.

You know what? Our children already know this. I have spent a lot of my time this evening talking about the distant far away circle that is nevertheless family to us, but I want to bring our focus in closer to home for a minute.

And to say that tonight I am mostly speaking to the many of you out there of my age and generation. I'm speaking to us because a lot of what I am saying – our children already know. Surveys and statistics tell us that youth are highly concerned about the health of the planet.

So as I talk about the circles of care tonight I want to put in our minds not just Henock, but all the youth getting ready to come out on this stage in just a few minutes, the youth in church camp this summer, the squirmy little kids who make it hard to concentrate on the sermon sometimes, the children in your neighborhood who you don't know and haven't yet gotten into a relationship yet of translucent, appropriate, vulnerable give and take.

I bring them up tonight to say we Disciples have to care about Henock whom we have never seen, and we have to care about the youth who we see every day. And we need to reach out to them.

And not so our churches will survive but so our world will survive. God has a word for us today. And our youth are listening. These young people are our prophets and our teachers. We need to be in relationship with them so we can be in their circle of care. Not so we can survive – so the globe can SURVIVE. They get it. This is not just about replicating ourselves. This is about changing. And young people among us are already leading the way. Praise God.

These are dangerous and promising times. We find ourselves in waters we don't know or even understand. But even here we find ourselves within a circle of care.

At the end of little Henock's dedication day, our Indiana delegation and hosts got back on the river at our farthest point, heading toward home as the sun was setting. At first we were lost in the beauty of that sunset. A quiet came over the canoe. We stopped talking and just turned and looked in silent awe.

The sun goes down fast on the Equator. And soon – very soon – it became dark – very dark. And we were still out on the river in the middle of the forest with no electricity. We began to feel uneasy. Vulnerable.

And then the stars began to appear. Shining stars. The most brilliant night sky most of us had ever seen, far from the lights of the city. Far from the blare of television and emails and late night WalMart runs. And soon we were able to find – not the Polar Star of our northern sky, but the Southern Cross – just ahead of us – leading us by its gleaming light.

But it wasn't just the stars in the sky that led us home that night – or even the competent captain of our canoe who reassured us. We also began to notice – as we progressed back up the river, retracing our journey of the day, past the villages we had visited when the sun was high – we began to notice shouting and singing. We saw torches lit, as our church family whom we had first met earlier that day, village by village, heard the put-put of our outboard motor, and began to celebrate our oneness again. As we passed by, they sang us toward our destination.

¹ -- Albert Einstein, letter dated 1950, *Mathematical circles adieu: A fourth collection of mathematical stories and anecdotes* [compiled by] Howard W. Eves, Boston: Prindle, Weber & Schmidt, 1977.

The shining stars, the human voices, the lap of the river against the boat. A sense of peace descended in a vision of wholeness that only God provides, the polar star of one human family, one world, abundant life for all, but taking on real life flesh and blood reality through our family on the shores of the river. At night, leading us through uncertain waters, singing us home.

The Southern Cross was our polar star that night as we were drawn more deeply into the circle of care created by Congolese Disciples. Their singing late into the night was a reminder of Jesus' prayer and of all Christ was willing to do so long ago, on another cross, to open the way for us. To reconcile us to God and to each other. To make us one for the healing of the nations.

It all took on flesh and blood reality that day in the dedication of baby Henock.

God's child. Our child.

Church, now what?