

May 2012

I recently received an email from an acquaintance that had at the bottom a quote from the American poet, Edwin Markham (1852-1940). He was Poet Laureate of Oregon and the founder of the Poetry Society of America. His poem "Lincoln, the Man of the People" was read by him at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. in 1922. The verse in the email I received was from Markham's poem "Outwitted."

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 and took him in!

His poem reflects the values Markham picked up as a member of the Disciples of Christ. Disciples value unity in diversity. Rather than building theological walls to keep out heretics, Disciples take the risk of love and take them in. Of course exactly who counts as a heretic depends upon your perspective, your interpretation of scripture and your idea of orthodoxy. For Disciples the simple confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior has been enough.

That does not mean there are no other important issues. Nor does it mean that discussions don't need to take place and even positions taken. But it does mean that love and acceptance will not be withdrawn because of differences. By grace, God has welcomed us into a caring relationship and it is by grace that we embrace each other. "Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:7). We draw a big circle to take in others because the Lord has done the same for us.

One of my favorite Christian thinkers Stanley Hauerwas has said that the purpose of the church is to show the world what it means to be the world. By that he meant, the way we care for each other, embrace each other and deal with our differences is supposed to be a model of how God intends the entire world to behave. That doesn't mean the church must be a little utopia. It does mean that patience, forgiveness, respect, and bearing one another's burdens are necessary. Judgment, bitterness and exclusion have no place where love has "the wit to win."

Drawing big circles to take diverse peoples in is not easy to do in a world where many want to draw little circles to keep people out. Sure, life is less

complicated if we just associate with those who think like us, talk like us, look like us. But life is richer if we remember that “God so loved **the world** that he sent his only beloved son...” (John 3:16). It is the intention of the Lord to break down the “dividing wall” of suspicion that misunderstanding and fear erect that keep people apart and “create in himself one new humanity” (Ephesians 2:14-15). Let’s work and worship with that purpose in mind.