

What a beautiful song the choir just sang, *“Come to the Circle.”* I originally learned it at a retreat on Cape Cod with choir members from all over the State. And now pandemic scientists are cautioning all choirs, to sing virtually, or separated with masks on! Similarly, we are very cautious about all meetings, even though churches and other organizations have found their strength in “fellowship,” in “circles,” from sewing circles, to prayer circles, bridge clubs, reading clubs, men’s groups, women’s groups. “Come to the circle of love” says our choir song. We have to find ways to still gather as community, as a group of people with common interest, common focus. It is in our DNA, human beings are wired for being in relationships, and without community, we wither. So it is a challenge: in times of social distancing, how can we maintain social connecting???

Our scripture lessons for this morning are interesting in that the Apostle Paul was actually writing the letter to the Philippians from prison. The church at Philippi was thought to be one of the churches dearest to his heart; he had close relationships with many of the members there, and expresses his love for them even across the miles from prison. Remote connection. Connection through the Spirit.

Paul’s writings about Love and Grace are very powerful, even as they may sound idealistic. We remember his memorable words to the church at Corinth: “LOVE is patient, love is kind... Love does not seek its own way...” and to the church in Rome: “nothing in all of creation, neither height nor depth nor powers, can separate us from the Love of God in Christ.” And here to the church of Philippi: “Whatever is lovely, gracious, honorable and true...” (Surely these days we could use strong doses of things “lovely, gracious, honorable and true!”)

But the key to finding these things in our world, according to Paul, is in another part of his letter, Chapter 2, that urges us to “have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but in humility “emptied himself, and took the form of a servant!” Paul wanted all his followers to stop

feuding, stop being so self-centered, and focus their minds on the ways and teachings of Jesus Christ. William Barclay a highly respected New Testament scholar, translated Paul's word like this: “Do nothing in a spirit of selfish ambition, but in humility, let each consider the other better than himself.” Barclay goes on to describe the dangers of selfish ambition: He says: *“If one is forever concerned first and foremost with his own interests, he is bound to collide with others. He will always think of other human beings as enemies or at least as opponents who must be pushed out of the way. Concentration on self inevitably means elimination of others; and the object of life becomes not to help others but to push them down.”*

From close relationships to political negotiations, we need to find and underscore the value of considering the position others, often even considering them first and foremost, doing more listening than speaking. Maintaining a self-centered stance only leads to the termination of dialogue, the termination of relationship. So Paul says in very strong language to “Look not only to our own interests, but also look to the interests of others.” There is much talk among spiritual leaders about respecting the “otherness” of every “other!” (This is not to say that we will never try to sway opinion, or try to exert influence; but we will always do so with respect, listening to the other carefully and responding in a peaceful manner.)

Some of you remember a forum we had here at Belleville with Robert Azzi, a Muslim journalist, raised Christian, who lives in Exeter. He had spoken at many churches, and at our public library, on interfaith respect and understanding. The reason I think of him now is because of Paul's words: Count “others” better than oneself, look to the interests of “others.” And Mr. Azzi chose his email address to be “THE OTHER AZZI.” He spoke to us that Sunday morning on greater understanding between Christians and Muslims, with a special focus on the Scriptures. So I share with you now some of the the beautiful

words he shared. As Paul says, “whatever is lovely, gracious, honorable or true, let us think on these things!”

First of all he says he is humbled by our invitation to speak, comes as a friend, neighbor, and lover of peace! He quotes the Koran as saying that the “truly pious are constant in prayer, and will spend their substance on near kin, orphans, the needy, the wayfarer, the beggars, and for the freeing of human beings from bondage.” Sound lovely, gracious, honorable?

He points out that both the Bible and the Koran do have sections that are problematic if taken literally for today, because they are tied to the culture of their time. For example, in the Bible, passages that speak of strict gender roles, or Paul’s advice that a slave to return to his master, or words in both holy books about excluding or annihilating certain tribes or people with different beliefs.

But so many words in our holy books soar with beauty and grace. We have our favorite words from Paul, Jesus, Moses and Isaiah. And here is a famous passage from the Koran: “We have created you all from male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another.” The implication is: get to know one another through love and understanding, not through fear, terror, and conflict! “Love your neighbor” and the Golden Rule to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” clearly show up in all the religions! Apparently in the Prophet Muhammad’s last sermon, he said “Hurt no one, so that no one may hurt you.” They are words of peace, honorable words.

Speaking of his Exeter neighborhood I assume, Robert Azzi says *“Today I live in a place I love, surrounded by those who love me. To my friends, I’m not a good Muslim neighbor; I’m a neighbor, who happens to be a Muslim. I live in a place where I believe America’s promise of truth and freedom will eventually overcome slander and lies, where those who hate will be marginalized.”* Words that sound lovely, gracious, honorable and true! ... we hope, and we pray.

As followers of Christ, we know the soaring ideals describing the Spirit of Christ. I'll remind us of what Paul called “Fruits of the Spirit:” Love, Peace, Joy, Patience, Kindness, Gentleness, Self-control, etc... And all of these qualities we are confident start with the mind of Christ himself, who humbled himself to be with us in human likeness, taking the form of a servant! Think of the image of Jesus washing the feet of his followers! That says it all. Humble servanthood always does put the needs or interests of others first and foremost. I know that we will all always fall short of considering others first. We have too much natural instinct to put self first, that starts when we are toddlers, that starts with natural self-preservation, announcing oneself and one's needs to the world, making one's own way in the world, discovering self-identity and self-esteem.

But Maturity, growth into adulthood will always include the tough lesson that the world does not revolve around us, that we are not the center (Even Jesus said “not my will but thine”), We also do well to admit that we are not always right, nor always perfect. No, the way of Christ, the mind of Christ is to always try to be humble, try to readily admit our mistakes, shortcomings, which then automatically creates more love and respect for others in our community.

Nature is also a great impetus for humility: To quote the old song that Charlie sang: *"Who made the mountains, who made the trees, who made the rivers that flow to the sea, and who hung the moon in the starry sky? "Somebody bigger than you and I."*

Let's all find our “God time,” our time in nature, our time in silence, our time with beautiful music, our time to think about things that are “lovely and gracious and honorable and true.” Our world needs people with that kind of focus, now more than ever. We need circles of love that are respectful of the “other,” that are forgiving, and inclusive; we need expanding circles of love, genuine community in Christ. *“Come to the Circle of Love.”* Amen.