

Living the Grace Filled Life
Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17
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Rev. Laurie Crelly at East Church
Grand Rapids MI

Most people don't know this about me but I attended three different High Schools without moving. I was part of shrinking school budgets of the 1980s. Maybe you experienced it around here too. Populations were in decline and the government was trying to cut school budgets, so school districts started seeking ways to save money. The Golden Valley School district made the hard decision to merge with the large Hopkins School District to our west. Hopkins had two high schools and so in my sophomore year I started riding 30 minutes to Lindbergh High school. My old High School was sold to a private Charter school called Breck. Hopkins was much bigger and my class size went from 60 kids to over 200. The Golden Valley kids tried to fit in and cheer the home team at games. I was part of the marching band and went to all the games. Our biggest rival was the other high school in the district Eisenhower High School of course along with Wayzata and Edina, our neighboring school districts.

Like any competitive organization, we were fiercely loyal to Lindbergh and saw Eisenhower as the rival school to oppose even though many of the kids grew up together. I, as the new kid, quickly learned to despise the other teams as well in my attempt to enjoy High School. So, you can imagine the fear and frustration of the students when word spread that Eisenhower was closing and we would need to become one, even larger, new High School.

This merger was different because of the strong rivalry. The school district decided they needed a new identity. When Golden Valley joined, we didn't do that. Early in my senior year we held a huge contest for the school to design a new logo and mascot. We dropped the Maroon and Gold for Blue and Silver and became the Royals with a lion as the mascot.

This competition helped us shape a new identity for everyone. Lindbergh, Eisenhower and even the Golden Valley kids who really lost their old identity as the Vikings. We made friends,

we dropped our old rivalry attitudes for the most part and we worked to embrace our new identity as the Hopkins Royals. When I graduated I was the first generation of Golden Valley kids to graduate and the first year graduates for the new Hopkins Royals High School. This year we will be celebrating our 40th anniversary and the high School is bigger than ever, covering over nine suburbs.

It can be hard sometimes to make those adjustments and establish a new identity over time. As humans we gravitate toward finding our tribe, our identity and having distinct beliefs and values. We develop rituals, alliances and unfortunately also prejudices against other groups of people. In Jesus' time the people of Judea and most of the middle east had great animosity toward the occupying forces of the Roman empire. Older prejudices toward anyone not seen as Jewish also persisted.

We experience this still today in many ways within our culture and see it in our world. Such attitudes can become institutionally sanctioned and create racist and unequal laws along with superiority complexes used to exclude and oppress others. I was watching the Harry and Meghan series the other night and they show how centuries of Colonialism and the development of racist views within the Monarchy and England shaped Harry. No one is born racist, it is something you are taught. If it is taught then it can also be unlearned. A number of events in Harry's life contributed to his own personal work of recognizing and then unlearning the racism he was taught and grew up around. A big part of that came when he fell in love with Meghan. The reactions of the family and the country to the idea of a black person entering the royal family was too much. Harry had to make a real conscious decision to uphold or dismantle the racist views he was raised in. He chose to love his wife and began to unlearn and resist it.

One of the themes we see and hear repeatedly in the Gospel is Jesus tearing down barriers and proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come to all. Last week we celebrated the coming of the Magi. The text tells us they came from the far east and other details seems to point to

the Eastern religion of Zoroastrianism. This week we hear the speech that Peter gives to a group of gentile Romans as he becomes aware of the message of inclusion that God has been giving him. To give you a little context if you are not familiar with the full story here. Peter is proclaiming the gospel in Joppa. One day while he is praying he has this amazing vision of the blanket coming down and God saying take and eat. When Peter refuses to eat of these forbidden animals according to his religious tradition the voice says, "do not call unclean what God has declared clean." Immediately following this vision emissaries for Cornelius, the Centurion comes seeking Peter. This whole experience challenges Peter's understanding of who the message of Salvation is expanded while also confronting his own prejudices toward people outside of Judaism. We see his transformation as the story progresses. Finally, Peter declares, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears God and practices righteousness is acceptable to God." This is his declarative statement that reveals Peter's newfound understanding and acceptance of people outside of Judaism as fellow believers. It was a revolutionary idea that the message of salvation through Jesus was for all people, not just Jewish people as they first believed.

There is a universal and inclusive nature to the Gospel message. We just celebrated Jesus coming to live among us as fully human and fully God as the embodiment of God's salvation to bring reconciliation to all of creation. And today we celebrate the Baptism of Christ. This event marks the beginning of his ministry but is also understood as Jesus identifying with the fallen and sinful nature of humanity. Sin is a universal human trait that create barriers between individuals and God. Some of the different metaphors of baptism is a washing away of our sins and being clean again before God. We also know of Paul's words that through baptism we die to our sinful nature and are raised up into new life. We are new creatures born into the kingdom of God.

The Gospel calls all people into relationship with God. When we see religion restrict or create more barriers of acceptance instead of expanding we are limiting the power of God's Grace.

We all start at the same place – at the baptismal font where we confess that we are helpless in sin and need God’s Grace to bring us into new life.

Over the next several weeks we will be looking at what it means to be part of this Grace-filled Community that God has called us to. But today we all start here at the baptism of Christ remembering that the humble act of confessing our sins and our helplessness in that sin is the key that marks our entry into the kingdom of God. Let us pursue the Kingdom of God and God’s Righteousness as we draw the circle wide and wider still.

As a reminder to us of that ever expanding inclusiveness of God’s Grace let us sing the refrain twice of this wonderful song.

Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still

Let this be our song

No one stands alone, standing side by side

Draw the Circle wide.