

## Everybody In

Readings        'Outwitted' by Edwin Markham  
                     'Be Kind' by Michael Blumenthal  
                     'The Task of Religious Community' by Mark Morrison-Reed

Draw the circle wide. Everybody in to the circle. Love and I had the wit to win: we drew a circle that took him in!

As People's Church seeks to be 'a beloved community embracing and serving our diverse world' we work to draw bigger, more expansive circles – to remember our conviction that no one is outside of the circle of love and care – and then we work to make it so.

We have done so much this year. We have welcomed so many into our circles – members and friends of our church, our children, our homeless friends and neighbors, and even a few celebrities.

Last year, your board led us in developing a new mission and vision statement, which members of the church adopted at the annual meeting last May. We have clearer aspirations for ourselves. Our vision is Aligning with the Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association while growing in love, People's Church:

- Builds a diverse and inclusive loving community
- Freely searches for truth and meaning
- Provides solace and rejuvenation
- Embraces equity and pursues Social Justice
- Cares for our planet Earth, the home we share with all living things

Let me tell you some of the ways we are living into that vision.

First, People's Church builds a diverse and inclusive loving community.

People's people are loving people. We show that love especially in times of loss. We have had eight members of our church die in the last year, more surgeries and serious illnesses, and other losses than I can count. It has been a hard year... and we have showed up for one another – with meal trains and with visits, with cards, and with good thoughts, prayers, and meditations. A large team make our meaningful, personalized memorial services possible by using their talents with audio-visual technology, music, baking, cleaning, and organizing. It is beautiful to witness all the ways, mostly informal, that you show up and support one another. You are generous people.

People's church builds a diverse and inclusive loving community. Every time I meet with people considering membership in our church, I ask them to tell me or other leaders if they see us not living into our stated values. I tell new people that, because they are often the best people to notice these things, but everyone else can too. And a number of you have trusted this church enough to point out the ways we are not yet the diverse and inclusive loving community we aspire to be. A few trans and nonbinary members told me about challenges here – and so last month Cylise and I led a service where they talked about their experience and I spoke about how we can be better allies to trans folks within and beyond our congregation. In the last month, I've seen you all make small, important changes – there have been requests to share pronouns the beginning of meetings, sign-ups for the transgender inclusion class starting next month, and some good conversations growing out of the article about trans folks in the latest issue

of the Unitarian Universalist Association magazine. You all are living our values and making sure trans and nonbinary folks know they are in the circle of love and care.

Other People's people have told your board leaders and me that having a minimum pledge leaves them feeling outside our circle. It causes pain to have to check the box on the pledge form indicating that they couldn't pledge at least \$100 to the church each year. The board listened and abolished the minimum pledge at a recent meeting. They agreed that having a minimum pledge gets in the way of us being who we say we are. This is a powerful statement that everybody's in, that we are drawing our circle wide – and it is an act of faith. We believe that you all give to support the mission and the vision of the church because they are compelling, because what we do here matters and you want to support it, not because there is a minimum requirement that you have to meet to be able to be considered a member in good standing. Your generosity makes this possible.

People's Church freely searches for truth and meaning. That happens in so many ways. In worship, in conversations, in chalice circles, in individual hearts. It also happens in religious education. This year, our children are learning about Jewish and Christian traditions. I have a few photos to share (**younger kids with maps**). Our younger kids are learning Bible stories, the stories that have held meaning for generations and have things to teach us today. Our older kids are learning about how Judaism and Christianity are lived today (**older kids on visit**). This is their visit to St. Joseph's Church. In addition to this education, we continue to offer comprehensive sexuality education to our children and youth, so they receive information about relationships, their bodies, and sexuality based on the latest scientific understandings and rooted in our values. Next month, we are collaborating with First Congregational and Kazoo School to host a training for new our whole lives teachers – people are traveling in, some from great distances, to be trained to teach like we do in their congregations and schools. Ten people's people are being trained as well. We are inviting more and more people into our circle, getting more people trained to teach, getting more children and youth the comprehensive sexuality education that everyone deserves. We dream of a world where everyone is in this circle. We are drawing the circle wider. Your generosity makes this possible. People's people provide solace and rejuvenation. So much of that happens in worship. We are fortunate to have a stellar music program. A few months ago, I was in conversation with a guest preacher, asking him about what kind of music he would want for the service he was leading. I said, "we have a pianist, a bell choir, a choir, an organist, a number of folksy singer-songwriter types, some brass instrument players, a flutist, a teen rock band, a bassoonist, a clarinetist, some drummers, and probably some others that I'm forgetting right now. If you have a musical idea, we can probably make it happen if you give us some time to prepare it." We have such a wealth of musical talent here. This is a preacher's dream. This week, I sent Savannah an email on Monday, saying, 'I want the song 'Draw the Circle Wide' to be part of the service this Sunday' and she made it happen. Your generosity makes this possible.

People's people embrace equity and pursues social justice. You all do this in so many ways, through church projects and in other ways. When I feel discouraged by the world, I pull up a video of this church in action. Many of you have seen this video of the Potluck in the Park that our social justice leaders put together last summer in support of the Bronson Park Freedom encampment. Many of you were there. Here is the video.

This, for me, is a glimpse of the beloved community, it is everybody in to the circle. It is People's people and homeless people and people from other churches and a few local restaurants and a whole bunch of community members eating together and talking to each other. We created a space for everyone to draw a circle that is so wide that everyone in our city is included. Your generosity makes this possible.

And, over the past year, we are working to do more to help our friends and neighbors transition out of homelessness. We are partnering with Open Doors. About 35 of you came to a meeting a few weeks ago

to learn more – and others couldn't be there, but will join in later. We will be helping with tutoring, mentoring, minor repairs, and in other ways. In these small actions, we will be showing people who are too often overlooked or ignored that they are within the circle of love and care, that we respect their inherent worth and dignity. Your generosity makes this possible.

You all have built an impressive reputation in town for your work for justice and equity, for the way you draw love's circle wide and invite everybody in. Because of that reputation, I have been recommended to serve on the board of the Kalamazoo Foundation for Excellence as the representative of the faith community. The Foundation for Excellence is a foundation for the city of Kalamazoo that will fund the city budget, decrease property taxes, and fund projects that promote safety, inclusion, economic vitality, and environmental responsibility, among other goals. Charlae Davis, the executive director of ISAAC, the congregation-based community organizing effort we are part of, encouraged me to apply for this position – and pending a vote by the city commission tomorrow and the foundation board itself next month, I will be. I am the one being recommended and the recommenders cited the values I hold, and the relationships I have built, but I've only been here for three and a half years. I didn't create this opportunity for myself. I was encouraged to apply and made the finalist for the position because of the reputation People's Church has built for generations and the ways that you all partner beyond these walls with ISAAC and Communities in Schools and Center for Transformation and Loaves and Fishes and the list goes on. While there are other clergy on the board, I will be in the seat at the table representing the whole faith community of Kalamazoo. It is an endorsement of all of you that the recommenders trust that I can represent our diverse community. You all have made this church so trustworthy and so respected. I hope to build on that reputation and use my position to draw a wider circle of love in our community. Your generosity makes this possible.

Finally, People's people care for our planet earth, the home we share with all living things. You all do this in so many ways – from the youth group working to create a place on our grounds for reptiles and amphibians to hibernate, to our building and grounds team installing more energy efficient lights, to regular road clean-up days along tenth street. This year, our green sanctuary leaders presented, and the board adopted, a new land management plan for this plot of earth we inhabit. It's a detailed document of the health of our ecosystem and how we might work to improve it. It also includes ideas for how to get each of us out and engaged with these beautiful grounds. You will see more opportunities for that this spring as the weather warms. Your generosity makes this possible.

And those of you familiar with the rhythms of the stewardship sermon know what's happening next. Now I ask you for money. I tell you that we couldn't do any of this without your time, your talent, and your money – and now is the time to make a financial commitment to continue the good an important work of our church. If you are newer around here or visiting, please know that I don't spend every Sunday singing the praises of the congregation. This is a special day – and also probably a good introduction to the congregation.

We have big plans ahead. Over the past year, we had a 'Widening Our Welcome' process to do some strategic planning for our future. You all voted to draw our circle wider by creating worship services especially for children and youth on Sunday mornings, which Diane and I are calling worship circles. This will create more space in this room for more people to join us – and it will give our young ones services that are especially tailored to their developmental needs. We need your support in all sorts of ways to make this possible, including your money. We will need volunteers to help lead these worship circles --- or lead the first part of this service on days I am leading a worship circle. I am in the process of adjusting our staffing to allow our staff and me to have the time coordinate these services. I'm excited about what's to

come. We're also working to grow our work in justice, outreach, and social events within the church. Your generosity makes all of this possible.

We know there is still work to do. Part of the point of choosing a worthy mission, like 'a beloved community embracing and serving our diverse world' is that we will not get there. We will never achieve that every minute of every day, but each movement we take to align our practices with our aspirations draws our circle wider, invites everyone in, and matters. You are ambitious for your church and your community – and your generosity will make it possible.

One of my highlights from the past year was having Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin speak from this pulpit. Ann Feldmeier and others organized this event in about a week. It was amazing... Here's a photo. They were here to speak about economic justice in general, and the need for a \$12 per hour minimum wage in particular – with no exceptions for tipped workers.

Well, friends, I have some hard truth to share. I am telling you because I trust we can do better. There are ways that you are a generous employer. A year ago, I had a baby – and I took eight weeks of paid leave, which is precious and too rare in our country. It was such a generous thing you were able to do. Thank you. And there are ways in which we are not living into our values of justice and equity. This church pays some of our employees less than \$12 per hour, less than the statewide minimum wage Jane and Lily advocated for. We have other staff members who are paid less than what the Unitarian Universalist Association considers fair for their position and the cost of living in Kalamazoo. This afternoon the board will be looking over data about all of this and making recommendations that will inform our budget building process. I am urging them to make strides to close this gap between our aspirations and our reality. Your generosity will make this possible.

And now the logistics of pledging. Those of you with an email address on file with the church have already received an email from [generosity.peoples@gmail.com](mailto:generosity.peoples@gmail.com) with an electronic pledge packet and a link to an online pledge form personalized for you through the tech wizardry of Steve Dibble. We're trying it this way to save the letter-stuffing time of our volunteers and to better live into our commitment to the earth by reducing our paper use. If you receive the newsletter by mail, we will be mailing you a paper packet tomorrow. There are also packets available at a table in the foyer today.

How much should I give? People sometimes ask. I invite you to give generously. That looks different for everyone. Think about how much you value this congregation and how much you want to support its mission in the world. Choose an amount that feels significant – that gives you a sense of contribution and co-ownership, enough that you feel like you are drawing the circle wide and inviting everyone in. Find that sweet spot where it's enough to make you feel generous and committed and part of things and excited when you see the transfer on your bank statement or write the check – but not so high that you feel resentful or burdened. I trust you to know what that is for you.

This year, your stewardship leaders and I encourage you to set up monthly automatic giving. Why? Because it helps us to better budget for the coming year. We have found that it works better for people who are paid monthly or biweekly to give monthly. It smooths out some of the ups and downs of the church year and gives us income we can count on. If that is something that makes financial sense for you, please set up a monthly gift. There will be people at the stewardship table in the foyer before and after the service for the next month who can help you do that if you want assistance.

Being People's Church is both a theological claim and a practical reality. This church exists because of generations who have built it to what it is, who have given their time, talent and treasure to this

community, who have partnered with love to draw a wide circle and invite everyone in. It will continue to exist because each of us chooses to take on this mantle and carry it forward.

May we continue to draw the circle wide.

May we invite everybody in.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.