



Roanoke, Virginia

Rally Day

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“The Middle Rings”

Philippians 2:14-18

George C. Anderson

Philippians 2:14-18:

¹⁴ Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world, ¹⁶ holding forth the word of life so that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the service of your faith, I rejoice, and I rejoice together with all of you; ¹⁸ in the same way also you should rejoice and rejoice together with me.

I first began to explore the internet in the 1990s. This was back in the day
when you looked at a paper map to get directions,
when almost every gas station had at least one payphone outside,
when being on call meant wearing a pager,
when you had a landline but not a cellphone,
and when I could play basketball for hours
but had to save up to buy coats and ties I wore to work
every.... single... day.



Back in *that* day. I would log onto the internet using AOL, which I could only do from home. I would listen to the beeps, buzzing and static as I got connected, and then I was on. And all the while I was on, I was tying up our landline. In other words, while I was on AOL, unless I was responding to emails or reading an important article that was making me a better pastor or a wise theologian, I lived with guilt. For while I was exploring anything for my own enjoyment or interest,

Briarwood Presbyterian Church members could not call their pastor,
my wife could not call her husband or,
if she was home,
could not call her mother,
and my children's friends could not call to ask them to come over to play.

Because I was unavailable by phone and staring at my computer screen, I was sort of isolated... but also sort of *not* isolated. For when I was on AOL, I had these "communities" I could be a part of. I could make posts and even create or join a chat room to visit with others. What drew folks into these communities were special interests... cooking, politics, dating, hobbies, or... being a fan of a sports team... or maybe more specifically, being a fan of the North Carolina men's basketball teams.

It won't surprise those of you who have known me for a while that I got myself one of *those* communities and stayed in it for years. So,

- maybe while a member was trying to call me to ask why I wasn't at a meeting
- or while my wife was trying to call me to tell me to put something in the oven or we wouldn't have anything to eat that evening,

I would be reading about Vince Carter's amazing dunk or commenting on how quickly Antwan Jamison was off his feet, or I would have to read how some thought Dante Calabria was cut.

Some in the group knew each other already because they lived in the research triangle and had other reasons to connect. But not me. It was years before I met any of them in person. Still, it felt like I got to know them well, despite the fact that most of what we talked about was Carolina basketball.

Elizabeth Edwards was a member of that group. She was the first I met in person. She accompanied her then husband, John, to the Roanoke Civic Center while he was campaigning as a Vice President nominee. I had moved to Roanoke by then and this was an opportunity for us to finally meet face-to-face. Because they were to quickly leave for another event, she suggested that I find the campaign bus in the parking lot and wait for her to come out and we could speak.

I did that. When I saw her come out, surrounded by her entourage, I called her name and said who I was. She immediately called for me to come over. A secret service agent did not like that at all and told her that wasn't a good idea. She said, "[It's OK. This is George Anderson, a friend I haven't had a chance to meet.](#)"

["A friend you haven't met?"](#) the agent asked. "[This is *not* OK.](#)"



Elizabeth lobbied a bit more so they arranged for me to be escorted over to have a brief exchange... but that secret service agent had a point.

I will say that our online friendship deepened a bit as Elizabeth later leaned on the group while losing a son, going through first her husband's public scandal, then a divorce and her fight with cancer (God rest her soul).

But let's go back to when the only *significant* tie I had with Elizabeth and everyone else in that group was one shared interest. Those relationships are an example of what Marc Dunkelman calls an "outer ring relationship." Dunkelman wrote a book called *The Vanishing Neighbor*, a book introduced to me by my good friend, Tom Are.¹ Dunkelman says that for most of American history, especially in small towns and rural settings, communities were formed with rings. There are inner rings of those with whom you have an intimate connection; close family and friends. There are the outer rings of those with whom you have a single or temporary connection, like being a fan of a certain basketball team. Or it could be

- with a barista who knows you're going to order a latte when you walk in,
- or the dermatologist you regularly see, but only for checkups and treatments,
- or the person you go through at work to get something ordered.

In between those inner and outer rings are what Dunkelman calls "middle rings." These are the relationships you develop with those you have cause to see on a frequent basis which compels you to develop connections beyond a shared interest or cause. They are with those you would not have had a chance to get to know except that

- they live on your street,
- or they belong to the same civic organization,
- or they have a child in your child's class or on your child's team.
- Or they go to the same church, maybe even attend the same Sunday School class.

"What is significant and unusual about these middle ring folks," my friend Tom says in talking about Dunkelman, "is that there is a reason you are not *best* friends [with many of them]; you aren't that much alike. However, life has put you in contact enough that you appreciate or at least tolerate the differences. With a little patience [and a little work], you get along."² It is these middle ring relationships that form strong communities which open possibilities for growth and get things done that otherwise would not be there.

So:

Inner ring relationships of intimates.

Outer ring relationships that exist primarily for one reason or interest

Middle ring relationships that form devotions
that otherwise have no reason to exist.

¹ Tom Are, Jr., *Joy, Even on Your Worst Days*, Resource Publications, 2021.

² Are, Jr., p. 68.



I want to pause here and talk about Paul and his letters a little bit to make a point about these rings of relationships. You and I are going to consider his letter to the church in Philippi. If you joined a bible study, took a class, or found a community online to study Philippians—and let's say this is the only reason you know the others who join you—then you would join an outer ring community.

But you are studying a letter to a middle ring community. Paul's letter is written to a community that would have within it friends and family and might have drawn in folks because of a single interest or cause, but the overall community is a diverse collection of people with many differences. They are a community that

- shares meals,
- does business with each other,
- debates how to live under Rome's rule—
 - some are citizens and glad of it
 - some are not citizens and want none of it
- they help with the needs of their number who are in trouble,
- study their own scriptures—

and they are a community that sometimes fusses because they do not agree on everything. Every single letter we have that Paul wrote or was written in his name—including his letter to the Philippian church of which he seems to have the most affection—he writes in part to respond to disagreements among them, wanting to encourage their remaining united in their shared devotion to Christ.

Get it? I can be a part of an outer ring community that studies Philippians, but the church to whom the letter was written was a middle ring community of diverse people who had a life together, and who changed the world because they did.

Back to America.

Dunkelman says that in America, more than in England, we developed middle ring communities. From colonial towns to farm communities... and then even in cities, there evolved these means for people to interact on a regular basis with people they would not necessarily choose as friends. There evolved these social means by which people who were not alike and did not always agree got to know and like each other. Sure, there have been serious American divisions of class, race, religion, and culture, but even within communities divided from each other, there developed social clubs, schools and their PTAs, civil organizations, neighborhood associations, faith communities and the like that provided a means by which people would have the chance to get to know folks they would otherwise not have had a reason to know.

Blue and white collar workers, people of different political parties and faith communities would have these opportunities to enjoy something together, work on something together. Maybe they spend a lot of time together because their children or grandchildren became friends at school,



compete on the same team, or dance in the same recitals, but they were given the challenge and the gift of forming bonds with people who see the world differently.

Johnny Wheelwright provides a good description of what these American middle spaces are like. He is Owen Meany's best friend in the novel, *Prayer for Owen Meany*.³ He developed a friendship with Owen, who was stunted in his growth and had an abnormally loud voice. Maybe Johnny would have avoided Owen, except that his school and small town did not provide that option. Because Owen became such a good friend, he came to realize how lucky he was to live in a place that makes people figure each other out. He says, "I suddenly realized what small towns are. They are places where you grow up with the peculiar—you live next to the strange and the unlikely for so long that everything and everyone becomes commonplace."

But something has changed of late in America. Dunkelman says we are developing relationships differently. We are giving more time and attention to the communities of the outer rings. There are various reasons this is happening, but Dunkelman says the biggest is social media—folks doing what I did when I found my online community that roots for the Tar Heels. Social media serves many good purposes, but it does create this opportunity to develop relationships with—
allegiances to—
stronger bonds with—
even devotion to—

people with whom you have only one real connection. A shared passion for a political or social cause, for instance, can so pull you toward those with whom you agree that you begin to neglect the needed soul work of being patient with, and working to understand, those who see things differently. It even happens that one can feel intimate with, and have a devotion to, folks in the outer ring community—an intimacy and devotion that used to be reserved only for family and close friends.

The world is always changing, and this building of outer ring communities can be good. Genuine friendships can result. But there is a problem when these outer ring communities start to replace middle ring communities and divide inner ring communities. The glory of the middle ring communities is that they keep us rubbing elbows with folks who don't see the world the way we do and forces us to see the reasonableness of views that we don't share and the humanity of people who are different. When we spend all our time with people who think, talk and act like we do, we begin to fool ourselves into thinking that all reasonable people think, talk and act like we do.

Let's go back to Philippi. Don't for a second believe that this early church, or any other early church such as the ones in Corinth, Macedonia, Galatia, or Rome, is some sort of idyllic community where all were on the same page as to how to think, treat each other, or behave in the world. No, in Philippi there are some Jews keeping kosher customs, but even more, Greeks who could not care less about eating pork or being circumcised. There are men who are leaders and,

³ *Prayer for Owen Meany* is written by John Irwin, and this quote, on p. 73, is quoted by Tom Are, Jr. on p. 67.



odd for the times, women who are leaders. And because Philippi is a port city, there are folks in this community who come from all over the Roman world bringing with them their different customs and ways of looking at things.

Paul writes to this diverse community from prison. He wants to assure them that his imprisonment is for the cause of the Gospel and not to lose heart because of what has happened to him. He also expresses his joy that this is a community that has remained strong in their devotion to each other. He doesn't make comparisons with Corinth, but if he did, he would tell them that they have done a much better job of remaining united even with their differences.

But there is enough disagreement—enough tension—that he also spends time encouraging them to keep it up. “**Make my joy complete,**” he says, “**by being of the same mind, having the same love. ... Count others [who are different] greater than yourselves. Look each of you not to what you are mainly interested in, but look at what drives others in their lives, what keeps them up at night. Bridge the distance between each other just as Jesus did when he did not think equality with God as enough but gave himself to us so as to join us fully in the challenges and joys of being human.**”

He closes the book by reminding the church to focus on what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable saying that by doing so there will be peace.

His whole letter goes back to what I read as our scripture lesson: “**Do all things without murmuring and arguing. Shine like stars in your witness to give cause for what we all need, for we are living in a crooked and perverse time that needs cause to rejoice.**”

Paul writes with his heart on his sleeve in writing the church in Philippi because he knew the world needed faith communities like it to be a force of reconciliation and peace. I preach this sermon with my own heart on the sleeve of this robe because I think our world today needs faith communities like this one more than ever.

I say that because I feel and sense what Dunkelman talks about—that there has been an erosion of middle ring communities that are formed to bind us rather than to reinforce what divides us. Weakened are those community organizations—the civic organizations and neighborhood groups—that use meals and projects and times of fellowship to make sure that people are spending time with each other, interacting and cooperating in ways they would not have done otherwise. Meanwhile, the outer ring communities that are formed on some single issue or cause are growing strong and winning the kind of loyalty and devotion that normally is given to close friends and family members. Ever radicalized political and social allegiances are even dividing family and ending friendships.

But here I am standing in the pulpit of the Second Presbyterian Church community. I am looking at people who perhaps are more and more coming back to in-person worship after being apart during the pandemic that helped fuel cultural divides while people related to many others through a screen. I am looking at a faith community that did remarkably well during that time. You kept this church going, you rose to the challenge of meeting needs in our community, and you even finished an amazing campaign for missions. But I'm with Paul in saying to this beloved community that has done so well to hold together and make a witness to the Gospel, that we need to be intentional and purposeful to protect this middle community. It takes some work—more



work than being in relationship with friends and family we love, and more work than feeling comfortable with those with whom we share an interest or cause.

If you are a member, I want to encourage you to keep showing up, put in the time, and remain accountable to this middle ring community of faith that joins our perspectives and gifts to demonstrate to the world what brings peace. If you are a visitor, I want to encourage you to join us, or find a faith community that has not been taken over by some special interest or cause.

I am passionate about this because so much of what is good in my life has been made possible by people who were given to me that I did not seek out... given to me because I was raised in the church... given to me because I was called to serve *this* church. How in the world would I have ever developed a friendship with Bob Williams, an IT guy who roots for Ohio State and who lives in a neighborhood that everyone drives past unless they want to visit someone who lives there, except that he was in a church class with me and then we worked together on mission trips. How would I have gotten to know Degra Nofsinger, who has led us in housing families in crisis, or Helen Dean, who keeps me more connected to the presbytery when I might want to escape to outer communities, or Dick Baynton, who told jokes that made me groan but made so many of you feel welcome in this church?

Maybe not all communities open minds and hearts like this one and cause folks who are different and who disagree to share pews, but I give thanks for those like this one that do. There are many secondary reasons for why we exist—to teach something, to provide friends, to get good stuff done—but let's never forget the primary reasons, beginning with our being a body of Christ that in its life and witness demonstrates the holy work of reconciliation between those of different minds and gifts and causes, and thus being a force of reconciliation in the world.

