



My Dad passed away in December, and over the past couple of months, I've thought a lot about what I have learned from him. He used to say that, "A stranger is just a friend you haven't met." One of the things that I love about STP is that the people that once were strangers to me are now my friends. I've been here 11 years. It's hard to remember what it felt like to be new, but today, my friend Kathy shared an article about circles that was a great reminder about that.

We have been at STP for 19 class weeks. If you have been with us before, you may have a circle of friends and you may be very comfortable here. You come in and feel like you belong and have a group of people that you gravitate toward. But think back on the first time you walked in. Did you know anyone? Who made you feel welcome? Was it a TTA, your director, or maybe another student? Hopefully someone reached out to you and made you feel welcome because you are with us again this year.

We need to be aware that there are those around us here, at church or at schools and co-ops that might not have a place yet. They are here with us in the very same room, but they don't feel connected to anyone. They wonder if any of their classmates will notice if they aren't there. They may have a hard time joining a circle, because the circle looks closed. They don't know what to say or are afraid to say the wrong thing.

At STP we try to be inclusive, but sometimes we are so comfortable in our circles, that we don't open them to anyone else. At our Open House, I told TTAs not to circle up because that sends their focus inward on themselves, instead of outward to our guests. This carries forward to every week in class. We need to expand our circles, talk to one another, and spend time listening to what is going on with people that we don't know. Sometimes that means leaving our cozy circle and sitting quietly with someone. Maybe they aren't comfortable chatting...but maybe sitting with them quietly is enough to make them feel included.

Opening the circle is action. Leaving your circle to join someone else is action. Inviting someone to join your conversation is action. Jesus sought people out to connect with them. He had many that came to him, but He reached out and talked to people who weren't expecting to be noticed. Fishermen. Zaccheaus. The woman at the well. We have the opportunity to connect with new people every week. A stranger is just a friend you haven't met yet! Let's open the circle, step out in faith and be the love of Jesus in action!

KEY VERSE: Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 1 John 3:18 NRSV