

Study Guide for “How to Draw Circles: The Christian Art of Building Life Together,” lecture by Willie James Jennings



During the annual Schaff Lectures in 2017 at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Willie J. Jennings presented “Forming Faithful Places.” In the second lecture, “How to Draw Circles: The Christian Art of Building Life Together,” he explored a spirituality of collaboration and pressed forward to illumine the logic of relationality for Christians. For Christians the goal of alliance building opens toward a profound desire for life together to be registered geographically and materially. We are people of community always moving toward communion. Yet the problem for us is that we often lack the courage and creativity to angle social, cultural, political, and economic life toward communion. Jennings proposes a vision of encircled life that might reshape how we imagine our work of living in places and spaces.

Watch on the Seminary’s website (www.pts.edu/Draw_Circles) or YouTube (<https://youtu.be/H6a0EjL9TBk>).

Session 1: Circles of Life, Circles of Death

Watch the lecture from 2:10 to 15:20.

- Jennings describes how circles help us make sense of the movement (home → work → gym → home; repeat) and belonging (inner and outer circles of friends and family) in our lives.
 - Name some of the “circles” that are most helpful in making sense of the movement and belonging in your life right now.
- Drawing from his previous lecture, Jennings describes the “unholy trinity” of merchant, missionary, and soldier.
 - What is your understanding of how these three forces historically created races by encircling bodies and identifying them only by seen differences?
 - In what ways did these circles cut through existing peoples and mash together disparate ones?
- Part of Jennings’s vision of the tragedy of this racial encircling is that it severed peoples from the land, which for many peoples was an important source of identity.
 - According to Jennings, what role did land play in some peoples’ circle of life and identity?
 - How did the “unholy trinity” take away the land as peoples knew it and draw both land and peoples into the sinister circle of production and consumption?

Session 2: Segregation and Joining

Watch the lecture from 15:20 to 29:35.

- According to Jennings, the deepest work of racial encircling has been segregation, both as an inner mindset and an outer social reality. While we attempt to explain away segregation as natural or harmless, it is in fact tragic and dangerous.
 - How have you heard people try to minimize or defend societal segregation?
 - When have you experienced “psychic distance” between yourself and another person so that you see the Other as an outsider?

- Jennings points us to Acts 15, a text that confronts us with the differences between Jews and Gentiles. God, who desires the joining of peoples to Godself and each other, delights in this joining—though it is hard for the Jews to accept.
 - Read Acts 15:1-29.
 - Describe a time when you have engaged in or witnessed what Jennings calls the greatest challenge for followers of Jesus: to imagine and then enact a life together in which peoples are joined without the loss of their differences?
 - Have you ever specifically carried out the storytelling aspect of this joining—telling another’s story and making it your own, while they tell your story and make it their own? If so, share about it. If not, how could you move toward this work?

Session 3: Quilting and Drawing New Circles

Watch the lecture from 29:35 to 43:13.

- Jennings claims that “self-knowledge and the knowledge of a people are quilt-like,” and the fragments of identity are meant to be taken apart and woven together with those of the Other.
 - How does this analogy help you envision or understand the work of joining to which Jennings is calling us?
- Segregation remains seductive, Jennings teaches, because it holds forth the illusions of self-determination and safety to both the powerful and those in diaspora. This segregation extends to churches of all types, where many pastors have settled for the love of their own people instead of the Spirit’s love that can create a people.
 - Have you ever been part of a church community that has accepted segregation and thus rejected the Spirit’s power radically to join?
 - Do you think it would help, as Jennings suggests, if pastors and other Christians remembered that they already worship another people’s God, that they “eat and drink” the Jewish God’s flesh and blood?
- Jennings closes by offering a picture of Paul in the closing chapter of Acts.
 - Read Acts 28:11-31.
 - How do you see Jennings’s concept of circles at play in this story?
 - What next step can you take to follow the Spirit in building relationships and commitments across the lines of circles that were constructed to keep us apart?