

I Want Jesus to Walk With Me

This is an anonymous spiritual, most likely of the African-American tradition. It is not a happy song, but surely is one Martin Luther King would have known well and sung often. The verses most used are “I want Jesus to walk with me...” “Along my pilgrim journey”, “In my trials,” and “In my troubles / when my head is bowed in sorrow”. All of them use the metaphor of a journey on foot, much like the marches for civil rights. This spiritual's tune is also anonymous. It is named after Sojourner Truth, the freed slave woman who publicly spoke for freedom and equality for all.¹

Once to Every Man and Nation

“Once to every soul and nation comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side.”

This hymn is based on a poem by James Russell Lowell, an abolitionist and the son of a Unitarian minister. He composed *The Present Crisis* in 1845, in response to controversy surrounding the annexation of the Republic of Texas to the United States. Admitting Texas, where slavery was sanctioned, would increase the power of the pro-slavery faction. The poem called on people to side with good against evil, to be brave when confronting those in power who stood for falsehood. In 1880, three Unitarian ministers took several stanzas of the poem and published it as a hymn. An updated version of their hymn can be found in our gray hymnal, StLT #119.²

Draw the Circle Wide

Gordon Light’s original text (1994) refers to a “still point” of the circle, around which all creation turns. From the sixth century BC comes the idea of the still point as a place of calm and balance: “the soft overcomes the hard; the gentle overcomes the rigid” (Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching). Mystics believe that there exists at the center of all life a silent, transcendent still point. It is the basis of all peace, love, wisdom, and joy. It is a circle that touches far horizons and knows no borders.

In 2011, Mark A. Miller set the refrain to new music. *“Draw the circle, draw the circle wide. No one stands alone, we’ll stand side by side. Draw the circle, draw the circle wide.”*

The refrain also reminds us that a circle is drawn when the outside points revolve around the center point—rather than vice versa. A similar idea was expressed by Edwin Markham (1852–1940) in his famous poem “Outwitted,” when he began: “He drew a circle that shut me out” and concludes, “We drew a circle and took him in”. This song has become a call for unity during days of controversy and division.³

¹https://hymnary.org/text/i_want_jesus_to_walk_with_me

²<https://humanistseminarian.com/tag/james-russel-lowell/>

²<https://poets.org/poet/james-russell-lowell>

³<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-draw-the-circle-wide>