

Widening the Circle
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Time for All Ages

What's not to love about a circle?

Kind of perfect and beautiful. The Lakota spiritual leader Black Elk observed a long time ago that all life is in a circle – not squares and boxes, but circles: from the trunk of a tree to the circle of life itself.

And in a vision he once had, he saw the hoops (circles of course) of all nations and tribes themselves gathered in one large circle. He said:

I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that make one circle, wide as daylight and starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.

Yes what's not to love about a circle?

Then there is this poem by Edwin Markham that many of us learned years and years ago:

He drew a circle that shut me out--
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

That poem has always come, for me, with a very clear image of someone maybe on a playground drawing a circle in the dirt – some on the inside and some kept on the outside.

I invite you to imagine that.... And how it feels... to be on the inside... or to be on the outside.

Now imagine this: Someone on the inside decides to draw a bigger circle... including all those who had been left on the outside of the first circle.

How does *that* feel? To those on both sides of that first circle...

So... the big question is: Which circle do we choose to draw in our lives?

He drew a circle that shut me out--
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

Reading

“The Central Task of the Religious Community” by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength renewed.

Sermon

Jesus, whatever or whomever else he was, was a very interesting guy. Not to mention courageous. He didn't hesitate to do what he thought was right, or say what he thought needed to be said, even if it meant making enemies among people in power, even if it meant putting his own life in mortal danger.

This morning, with my theme of widening the circle, I'm thinking in particular of all the times in the stories told about Jesus that he hung out with the so-called least respectable folks. This was scandalous to some – the Pharisees for example, who were a sect characterized by strict literal understandings of religious law and practice. Here's one example:

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

And then there is, of course, the parable of the Good Samaritan. The question that gave rise to the parable was “who is my neighbor?” Well, it turns out that the neighbor is the one who helps out, regardless of their status or social position – and the neighbor is of course also the person who needs the help.

In other words, maybe... just maybe... do you think?... just maybe our neighbor is... everyone!

And certainly if there is any spiritual figure in the history of humanity who taught by word and by deed that the circle of concern and love ought to include everyone it was Jesus.

But he wasn't the only one.

Several hundred years before Jesus, the Buddha cut through the hardened lines of caste distinctions, welcoming everyone to the path. The *dharma* or teaching, Buddha taught, is open to everyone, not just those of a certain caste or status or intelligence or whatever distinction you want to make.

Then there are those lines we heard in our opening hymn from the Sufi poet Rumi from the 13th century: “Come, come *whoever* you are, wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving... come, yet again come.”

It gets better – more challenging for sure – with the words to this passage we *didn't* hear in the hymn: “Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again come.” Come yet again come: You might not get your job back, or your spouse... you might have to serve a sentence for a crime... but you are still in the circle of humanity, of love.

Now, these teachings don't just come out of nowhere and they aren't just platitudes: Wouldn't it be nice if we included everyone in our circles of concern and love?

Yes, it would be nice.

But it seems to me we need to come to understand and experience that it is more than nice, that the teaching to include everyone grows from a deep realization of who we are as human beings. To put it another way, there is theological grounding to this “nice” idea. In any case, use whatever words you choose around this realization or theology:

Each and all made in the image of God, as Hebrew scripture puts it.

We are all part of the one interdependent web of being, in the Buddhist understanding.

We are made of the same stardust from ancient stellar explosions, to put a scientific twist on it.

And maybe we could also keep in mind that life is short. How do we want to spend it? Wasting effort and energy maintaining circles of exclusion, walls of separation? Or finding ways to widen the circle, to break down those walls?

All this said, we know, from our own experience and from looking around us, how hard it can be to practice what these sages preached, how challenging to embrace and integrate into our very being an ethic of inclusion, a spirituality of universal love and concern... however much we believe we should.

Goodness, there are so many, too many to count, circles drawn which include some and exclude others for no other reason than the color of their skin or the nature of their politics or religion or nation of origin.

Even if we think we do pretty well about all this, learning to be more accepting of differences, to celebrate diversity of background, color, ethnicity, gender, and so on... what about those whose politics differ from ours... or whose opinions about matters of great import, whether vaccines, climate change, or whatever, are quite different from our own? Not that we are meant to agree with everyone; which would of course be impossible. But can we manage not to put those with whom we disagree beyond the pale,

not to draw a circle that however unconsciously or unintentionally excludes others from our concern?

This being human is not always so easy, is it!

My sermon title this morning comes from a report published last year by the Unitarian Universalist Association titled “Widening the Circle of Concern.” The report focuses on the challenge of becoming more genuinely welcoming in our congregations and in our UU movement, particularly when it comes to addressing institutional racism and (to borrow language from the introduction to the report) to finding ways to be more genuinely welcoming to and inclusive of Black people, indigenous people, other people of color, LGBTQ people, those of limited economic means, and people living with disabilities.

I’m not going to try to summarize the two hundred pages of this report. Our Social Justice Council does plan to offer an opportunity for everyone in our community to study the report together and explore how we might learn from it and grow from it here at Old Ship.

But the one point I will make this morning is this – and it applies not only to the report’s recommendations to congregations, but I think to our lives in general.

It is one thing to *say* we are welcoming to everyone, that we’ve drawn a circle that includes everyone.

And quite another to find ways to actually do this.

Simple examples make the point.

We can say that we welcome people who don’t drink alcohol, whether as a matter of personal choice or because they are in recovery. But if we fail to offer non-alcoholic beverages at social events, the words of welcome are empty.

Or we can say that we welcome people who need to use wheelchairs, but if we don’t have accessible entrances and rest rooms, the words of welcome are empty.

Or we can say that we welcome people who don’t hear very well. But if we don’t have a good sound system and hearing aids, then our words of welcome are empty.

It is in this spirit that the report challenges us to notice ways in which we may be excluding or not fully welcoming people of color or of whatever background, ethnicity, and so forth, in spite of our words of welcome and our stated principle affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

You see, hanging our “Black Lives Matter” banner and a rainbow flag is good, but may not be enough. Our anti-racism book group is excellent, but may not be enough. And so on.

So... we have work to do. Of course we do! But it is good work.

How else, after all, would we want to live, and what sort of congregation would we want to be during these days of division and conflict, other than a congregation committed to growing our love and widening the circle of our concern, other than seeking to awaken more and more to our essential nature as individual manifestations of one

source, one spirit, call it God, call it cosmos, call it what you will... and then living accordingly.

“Living accordingly,” by the way, is what I would name, indeed as Jesus did name it and lived it, entering the “kingdom of heaven” – here and now, not in some time to come.

In the spirit of this morning’s reading by my colleague (who happens to be Black), remembering that this is the central task of religious communities (like ours!): “to unveil the bonds that bind each to all.”

Or in the spirit of the old poem, to draw our circle of love ever wider, ever wider, without end.

Or in the spirit of Black Elk, many hoops of the varied peoples of the world making “one circle, wide as daylight and starlight.

So may it be.

Actually... a little postscript: I expect most of you have heard by now that the developer who was buying our Parish House has had to back out.

Okay. A set-back.

But we will figure it out. Whether in weeks, months, or years. We have, after all, been here for centuries.

Along the way may we remember this: Blessings, not buildings, are at the heart of our Old Ship community. Buildings are in the service of our mission to grow circles of love as we seek to bless the world with our lives.

Benediction

Life is short... but love is long, love endures...

May we grow love with our lives,
share love with our lives...

Widen the circle of love with each step of our lives...
each day of our lives.

So may it be.