

## “Celebrating the Circles”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull  
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Nothing diffuses hierarchy like a circle. When a circle defines a table, the intention almost always is for equal status of those gathered at the table. Perhaps the best known such table is the Round Table of King Arthur and his knights. A 12<sup>th</sup> century commentator on this legendary round table explained that it was installed to prevent quarrels over status that sometimes erupted into brawls. The contemporary historian David Nash Ford notes that Celtic warriors commonly met in circles. Indigenous people of this land met in councils, whose architecture was the circle. Gathering *around* is a practice current and ancient.

The earth itself dances in a circle, once around the sun, twice around the sun, four to five billion times around the sun since earth's beginning. Gravitational force keeps us spinning around that which keeps us alive – the sun, the center of our planetary system. Circularity as an archetypal form is apparent in formations of megaliths – great stones – at sites worldwide. The most well-known are in the British Isles, and of these the most famous is Stonehenge. At summer solstice and winter solstice, this circular formation of immense stones permits a solar perspective that inspired its arrangement perhaps five thousand years ago.

Ralph Waldo Emerson held up the primacy of the circle in his essay of 1841 entitled simply, “Circles.” His opening sentences reveal the manner in which he and his fellow transcendentalists looked to nature for truths cosmic and personal:

“The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world.”

And a few words later:

“Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.”

It's been three years now since our Shared Ministry Committee discussed the possibility of launching in this congregation what is commonly called Small Group Ministry. How to go about it? How to structure it? How to ensure its vitality? And yes, what to call it? Circle Ministry rang true. The circle resonates for First Parish through our Caring Circle, our Circle Dinners, and the very tables around which we confer and decide the course of this church. The circle resonates as a primal shape around which humans have met for thousands of years in councils, in family gatherings, and in spiritual practices that mark our very movement around the sun. In circles, all are equal; all are visible; none can hide.

No, our Circle Ministry isn't quite the Knights of the Round Table or ancients gathered at Stonehenge on Summer Solstice, but there's a sense that we are amid a ministry that captures an ancient trace of how humankind has related most mindfully across the millennia, and I believe that sense inspires us to relate in ways that are precious and rare.

Twice a month, from October through June, close to 60 among us gather as circle groups of eight to ten in member homes, with each group led by two facilitators in structured conversation around a common topic.

Just as this congregation is bound not by creed but by covenant, so it is with our Circle groups. There is a common covenant, a behavioral covenant, with variations – of course with Unitarian Universalists there will be variations – from group to group. How to prevent these circles from turning into cliques? Among the common threads of these covenants is a promise to move outside the circle into the larger circle of congregational life through at least one activity that will serve the congregation. We're hearing evidence of this on this very morning with the sound of bells from aloft, thanks to the Circle group that chose to become this morning's bell choir. Next Sunday yet another circle group will be selling plants right outside the Meeting House after the morning service. Check your order of service for the abundance of options. These folks are pro-choice! And the proceeds will support maintenance of our Parish House gardens. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of this month, another group is sponsoring an Evening of Letters, a sharing of letters treasured and saved. And as for the circles expanding yet further, this coming Saturday, yet another circle is inviting non-circle members – children included – to join them in packing lunches and delivering them to Father Bill's Shelter for homeless men in Quincy.

In the spirit of Emerson, "around every circle another can be drawn." Our circles move inward, through the trusted conversation that happens week after week, and outward, through ventures like those I've just described.

How do we celebrate the circles? With enthusiasm, with spirited reflection, with service, with chalice lightings and meditations and thoughtful conversation that defines each gathering. These are circles that breed circles that breed circles!

So what do they talk about in these gatherings that folks return to week after week? One of the strengths of this ministry is that the topics are common – not ho-hum common, but common in the sense that all the groups are on the same topic at about the same time. The first session in April, for example, addressed "Siblings" and the second, "Sin." Word is that one group morphed the "seven deadly's" into affirmative form. I hear that sloth graduated to serenity! Of course, you let Unitarian Universalists loose with the topic of sin and what do you get? A slow morphing into "fun." The topics for May? "Mentors" and "Airports!"

When I think of Circle Ministry, I think of that hymn that is among my favorites, especially the last verse:

"We seek elusive answers to the questions of this life.  
We seek to put an end to all the waste of human strife.

We search for truth, equality, and blessed peace of mind.  
And then, we come together here to make sense of what we find.”

Nothing diffuses hierarchy like a circle. Nothing welcomes the stranger like a circle of conversation that is intentional around our common search for truth and meaning. Our ministry of circles happens because of the vision of our Shared Ministry Committee, because of the wise counsel shared in our research phase by others throughout our larger faith community who have known for themselves the power of small group ministry, because of our fabulous facilitators, and because of each of you who participate and each of you who is a member and friend of this congregation, lending support and sustenance to our many ministries.

A precious pebble has been dropped into the life of our congregation. As happens when precious pebbles drop into media that are fluid, a circle forms, and then another and another. The ripples of what we experience from our time together reach each of us, affirming the Spirit of Life that flows through us all.

I celebrate the circles. I celebrate our ministry of circles. I celebrate the many ministries of this parish. I celebrate each of you – whether you’re here for the first time or for the first time in a long time or for time that you’ve stopped counting. As we make our way around the sun amid this community of faith and practice, let us travel together in spirit and in wonder that we are here and together, blessed with the capacity to listen and marvel at the stories we share, the tears we shed, the friendship we find, and the community we discover. How glad I am to be on this amazing trip with you!

Amen.

### Sources:

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