

“Circles”

A Sermon for All Ages by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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You know what happens when you toss a stone into a pond? All these circles move out from where the stone entered the water. As we gather this morning on the edge of summer, it feels like we've cast several stones into this morning's pond, and the circles we can imagine moving out from that center are circles we're living.

We have dedicated one of our youngest. We are honoring fathers here and fathers absent, fathers living and fathers no longer living. The ceremonies of our worship mark the cycles of our lives, from birth to parenthood, from love that lives to love that we hold through memory.

Remember that those circles moving out from the center are in motion. So too we as a parish are in the motion marked by cycles of change. Last week we celebrated the legacy and gifts of Jacqueline Clark, our Director of Religious Education for these past sixteen years. Sixteen trips around the sun have marked the time that Jacqui has served as our Director of Religious Education – sixteen cycles of children adding that many years to their ripening. This morning Jacqui has introduced Nan Moore, our new Director of Religious Education. I know that you will welcome Nan as we anticipate our communal journeys around the sun, cultivating for our children and our youth the dreams and values and memories that become the stuff of their dawning adulthood.

Then there's the beach. Wait a minute. What does the beach have to do with this notion of circles? Well, this past Christmas, I unwrapped a gift from my daughter, Sarah, a little gem of a book by Sandy Gingras called *how to live at the beach*. Sarah knows that I would camp out right on the beach if I could – maybe not at Christmas time, but starting today, absolutely! This whimsical concoction of words and watercolors begins like this:

“At the beach, life is different. A day moves not from hour to hour but leaps from mood to moment. We go with the currents, plan around the tides, follow the sun. We measure happiness by nothing we can hold.. nothing we can catch. Everywhere...Life is jumping and elusive and momentarily momentary. We want to [stretch] the days, distill the memories, make them last. At the same time, we know that the beauty is in the evanescence. Every wave comes in, then retreats. Every day promises, then turns its back and slips away. Every joy has a little tease in it, a give and a take, and leaves a wake of longing.”

With these instructions on how to live at the beach, I'm reminded again of the seasonal, cyclical, fleeting character of our moments. Each is momentous.

“Your children are not your children,” observed the Lebanese poet, Kahlil Gibran. “they are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.” What a bittersweet message for a parent. Yet, we need to recall that it is so. Our children are born to us, and yet they are not ours. If we are blessed, they grow up. They drop their own stones into their own ponds. The dreams we spin as young parents are spun into the realities that ever surprise us in a texture that is never predictable.

How “we want to [stretch] the days, distill the memories, make them last.” I believe this is why Mark Greenside revisited Grand Central Station in his musing on Father’s Day. How readily he becomes the seven-year-old Mark, standing again in that personal landmark, with his small hand nestled in his father’s large hand, feeling “protected from God, the world, insanity, nature, from anything and everything.” We cycle and recycle such moments that float magically in the mist of time, causing us to smile and well up and ponder.

“Life is a circle from childhood to childhood,” observed Black Elk, member of the first nation of the Oglala Sioux. This father of wisdom knew by heart the power of circles. This power moved in him still, though he had been a young man of 28 when his nation lost so much at the Battle of Wounded Knee. His wisdom ripened. “Everything the ‘power of the world’ does is done in circles,” he reflected. To forget this is to risk much.

So it is with us. So it is for us this morning as we honor our fathers, as we dedicate our children, as we move through a transition of leadership, as we worship on summer’s threshold. So it is with us as we move toward something that you will hear much more about in the months ahead, something called our circle ministry.

Many of us know the power of sitting in a circle of trusted friends and speaking and listening. This is a ministry. In hundreds of our congregations across the country, circle ministry has unfolded, bringing congregants closer to the heart of what it is to do church. Sometimes it’s called small group ministry or covenant group ministry. It seems right for this congregation that we call it our circle ministry. Just as that stone is dropped into a pond and sets in motion circles that make that pond ever so much more compelling, so an idea was dropped many months ago into the conversations of our Shared Ministry Committee, and circle ministry was set in motion.

This morning I will plant the seed with an overview of how it works and what to expect for next steps. We have a committee, an implementation committee that includes Annie Spang, Jack Martin, and me. Our knowledge has grown from the reading done by all the members of our Shared Ministry Committee. Each of us also conducted an extensive interview with a minister or a member of another Unitarian Universalist congregation that has successfully launched this ministry – congregations as far reaching as Chicago, Atlanta, and Augusta, Maine, congregations small and large and mid-sized. It doesn’t matter. It works wondrously across variation.

How?

Some of you will be asked to be facilitators. We’ll prepare you to lead a small group, a circle if you will, of eight to twelve congregants over the course of a year, in meetings – no, not committee meetings, this is quite different! These are gatherings that will begin with a chalice lighting, a meditation, and a check-in, and then move into discussion of questions that we might call “evocative questions,” questions that stir you to think and feel in the deeper layers existence; and in a circle where respectful interchange is hallmark, you will get to know each other and yourselves, in new ways. Each gathering concludes with a check-out and your suggestions for what you would like to see continue and what you would like to change. Additionally, each circle decides on at least one contribution of energy and talent within the congregation and one contribution of energy and commitment within the larger community, lest we become inbred. This is not about cliques, but about ministry – receiving it, practicing it, sharing it. It’s not the same as volunteering, though participation is of course voluntary. It’s more like filling your own well and sharing the water.

So stay tuned. More will be explained in newsletters, in an autumn sermon, and in a workshop open to the entire congregation. This is an exciting venture for First Parish, as we continue to know the power of circles in our individual lives, our parish life, and our life on this large round planet that cycles with amazing regularity around the sun.

Such extraordinary stones we are casting into our ponds. Such an amazing day as we witness the sun rise and set, marking a pirouette of the earth itself, as we live and travel in circles.

Blessings to you, dear John Rahal. Happy Father's Day! Welcome, Nan! May we inhabit with gratitude this circle of faith of love.

Amen.

Sources:

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