

I. "Make the Circle Bigger"

A few weeks ago, as some of you read, I shared in the weekly e-News about coming back to St John's and signed my blurb with the words "hoping to help make the circle bigger." Did you wonder what I meant by that? There was also a link to hear the song called *Show Dem (Make the Circle Bigger)* Did anyone get a chance to click on the link and hear it?! If so, what did *you* think about it?

My spouse, Paul, introduced me to this version of the song following his recent trip to South Africa, where he said it was played on the radio many, many times. It's really a party song, welcoming more dancers on the floor so to speak. But when I heard it, I heard something more profound: I heard the challenge to pay attention to who is in my circle, who feels welcome in a relationship with *me*, and with whom *I* feel comfortable being in meaningful relationship.

When I heard the song *Make the Circle Bigger*, I heard an invitation to what Margaret Wheatley calls, "turning to one another." Having a business background, reading about management and human resources is one of my interests (nerdy perhaps but hey). Wheatley's work is a newfound curiosity of mine because she uses the concept of gathering in 'circles' as a means of conflict resolution and restoring hope in management but also in civil society.

This idea of gathering in circles is not new; it's an historical and global phenomenon, one simple example being sewing or knitting circles. Or think about Native American talking circles. The Episcopal movement of Beijing Circles to engage women and girls' global concerns also follows circle practices of "speaking with intention and listening with attention."ⁱ

The concept of circles is thick with associations. The image of a circle can connote feeling safe, having clear boundaries, creating common identity. Yet, by these same definitions, others may feel excluded or unwelcome, think: who's in or out of the group. Wheatley and others write to challenge our understanding and use of circles in building life-changing relationships with each other. That's what the writer of Luke-Acts prods us to do: to redefine "the sacred circle" of *who* is included and *how* we follow God in the ways of Jesus Christ.

II. Redefine "Circle"

The religious leaders totally dinged Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. That was *not* within the clear circumference of worship: Yes healing is important, they all agreed, but come during assigned office hours; this is not the traditional time or place!

Despite their earnestness and desire to live godly lives, the religious leaders' assumptions blocked their ability to see this woman and respond.

<pause>

What Jesus presses is the importance of holding the wisdom of tradition alongside the tension of meeting the needs of the people in the moment. Jesus was focused on his teaching yet he saw her; she didn't have to track him down. And then Jesus took the initiative to call out to this sick woman and invite her into the circle where she experienced life-changing healing. This *practiced, not just heard* good news led the greater community to really worship God.

Luke seems keen on inviting us to “make the circle bigger” with a reoccurring theme of inclusiveness, of expanding our understanding of who is a daughter or son of Abraham and therefore part of God’s family. This story and a later Sabbath-healing story in chapter 14, is only remembered in Luke.ⁱⁱ In both stories, Jesus challenges the definition of the sacred circle: again, who is included and how we relate to one another, even in the most sacred and protected moments of our lives.

<pause>

Jesus and his way of being with others holds up a mirror for self-examination: Like the crowd gathered that Sabbath day long ago, we also need to explore and name the assumptions about our relationship-circles with each other and with God that create unmovable, *rigid* boundaries where people are judged “in or out,” or where we are so fixated on doing the right thing we miss out on the godly thing.

The Gospel story challenges us to grow in self-awareness that allows for a permeable, elastic, organic container that can adjust quickly to share God’s transforming love in relevant ways.

This kind of learning about ourselves – discovering our hidden assumptions about others and hearing how they experience us (accurately or perceived), is what it takes to really see and understand and enter into meaningful, life-giving relationships with others. This is the hard, sometimes uncomfortable work of redefining our “circles” and making them bigger. Wheatley refers to this as a “willingness to be disturbed.”

III. Naming Our Assumptions

Two weeks ago I had the honor and fun of being a Chaplain at Camp Stevens for International Odyssey week. Camp Stevens is an Episcopal center in the wilderness where people of all ages come to camp and retreat throughout the year. They have several annual, organized programs, the International Odyssey week being one.

During this week, campers ages 11-16 come from Japan and Southern California to live together and learn from each other. It's a week of activities aimed at helping campers be disturbed and become aware of their assumptions and then helping them expand their relationships across differences. There is one day called Japan day, where the Japanese students (most of whom do not speak English fluently) organize games, a tea ceremony, trying on the yakutas, and request a personalized work of Japanese calligraphy. Here's mine: It means "adventure." This week of diversity was indeed an intentional, sometimes uncomfortable and scary, life-changing adventure!

Like the St John's camping trip to Sage Hill last weekend, this week was a rich time of actively pushing beyond our expectations and assumptions and building new relationships with each other. And as I come back to St John's, I wonder how we could do more of this here:

How we might redefine our "sacred circle," so that we see each other and our needs more clearly?

How can we muster the energy to take the initiative to welcome people into our community, including those who need to feel a sense of belonging way before believing?

And how can we better relate to one another in meaningful, healing ways, even when we're tempted to think, "we've never done it that way before"?

<pause>

1. In a moment, time of silent reflection ... Find questions in your pew →
2. Complete anonymously (set in the context of St John's, but maybe God's calling you to "make the circle bigger" at work or at home, or when you go back to school) – about you, not complaint session about others →
3. Take home, OR (optional) Put in offering plate and display next week.

<pause>

May we be willing to be disturbed and become more aware of assumptions that keep our circle boundaries rigid and static – assumptions that may be blocking us from seeing, reaching out to, and experiencing life-changing relationships with each other.

As followers of Jesus Christ, may we accept Luke's challenge to redefine and make our circles dynamic and bigger.

And may we commit to start small, with one new practice this year, trusting God is ever at work in us and through us.... Amen.

ⁱ Book, peerspirit.com

ⁱⁱ <http://www.gospelparallels.com/gospelparallels.html>