

Going in Circles

A sermon by the Rev. Mark Worth

READINGS:

1. From Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," published in *Essays*, 1841.

The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul.

2. From Black Elk, Black Elk Speaks, Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, as told through John G. Neihardt, University of Nebraska Press, originally published in 1932.

You have noticed that everything an Indian is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished... Everything the Power of the World does is in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard the earth is round like a ball, and so are the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nest in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours.

3. from Marilyn Sewell, "The Journey is a Circle," in Wanting Wholeness, Being Broken, Fuller Press, Portland, Oregon, 1998.

What if – instead of a march onward and upward – the journey is a circle? What if we leave the home of self only to return again and again to self, to the same person, and yet to a person paradoxically transformed? To see our lives this way, it helps immensely to understand deep within our bones that we really are going nowhere, that even as we are born and experience the loss of our first home, our mother's womb, and gain the world, we move again and again in cycles of loss and gain, until we give up this mortal flesh and move once again to the realm of the soul... The journey is all we have, and the journey is a circle.

THE SERMON

This fall our Sunday school children have been learning the stories of Jonah. There's an old trick joke: How many animals did Jonah take on the Ark? None. Jonah wasn't on the Ark, Noah was.

Jonah, we are told, is the fellow who was swallowed by a big fish – not a whale. The boys knew that whale is a mammal, and the story says he was swallowed by a fish! Smart kids. According to this wonderful old myth, God told Jonah to go to Ninevah and say that God was going to destroy them. Jonah didn't want to go there, and so he booked passage on a ship going in the opposite direction. But a storm came up, Jonah was thrown overboard, and he wound up – undigested – in the belly of a great fish. After three days, the fish spit him out onto the road to Ninevah. So Jonah wound up exactly where he didn't want to go. Sometimes life is like that – we wind up just where we don't want to be, despite everything we have done to try to be somewhere else.

Jonah went in a circle. He started out in one direction, and ended up in the opposite place. Noah's ark, I imagine, went around in circles. And it seems as though God also went around in circles – first creating humans, then giving up on the Garden of Eden, expelling Adam and Eve, and sending Cain into "the land of wandering," which is "east of Eden"; then regretting that he had created humans at all, destroying them, beginning anew with Noah's family, and finally promising to never destroy us again. If God had a plan, it didn't work very well. Create, destroy, start over again. One big circle.

And later, Moses and the Hebrews wandered in circles in the desert for forty years, looking for the Promised Land. The Bible begins with quite a bit of wandering in circles.

It may be the human condition to spend much of our time going in circles. All our lives we are on a journey. Sometimes it seems as though we're never really getting anywhere. We can see our

faults, but it's so hard to change our behaviors. Maybe we quit smoking or drinking, or some other habit we wanted to overcome. We get the job we thought we wanted. And then what happens? We never quite get to the place where we thought we were going. We find ourselves going in circles. And we want to complain. Did I escape slavery in Egypt just to wander in the wilderness? Where is the Promised Land and how do I get there?

New arts and old ~

Like the Native Americans, Ralph Waldo Emerson noticed the prevalence of circles in nature, leading him to conclude that the circle is "the highest emblem in the cipher of the world." He believed it provided an analogy for human thought and action. He wrote: "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."

The symbolism of circles is characteristic of nature and human culture and gives rise to a doctrine of impermanence. "There are no fixtures in nature," Emerson insists. "The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees... Let us rise into another idea; they will disappear... New arts destroy the old."

But if everything changes, what can we hold on to? Is truth finally unattainable? Emerson said, "No facts to me are sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back." Yet he did find a "principle or fixture of stability in the soul" itself. The central life of the soul is superior to knowledge or thought and "contains all its circles."

When he talks about impermanence, Emerson seems to be drawing on Eastern thought. Buddhists see the impermanence in everything. You cannot step into the same stream twice. The stream is never exactly the same as before. Yet the stream hasn't really gone anywhere; it is still there. The stream flows to the sea, the water in the sea evaporates, forms clouds, and comes down as rain, flowing in streams, flowing to the sea again. It's all one big circle and yet it's always new. And so are our lives.

The Zen Buddhists say, "Before enlightenment we chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment we chop wood and carry water."

When we awaken to who we are, we become who we are. The paradox of the journey home to the self is that to really be at home, we must leave home. To say we live in circles is not to say that there is no change. In fact, to Emerson the circle was a symbol of change. "Life," Emerson says, "is a series of surprises."

The spiritual journey ~

So let's go out on that journey, the spiritual journey that we are constantly traveling on. Perhaps you've heard the story of Rabbi Eizik, the son of Rabbi Yekel of Kracow. As Marilyn Sewell tells the story, he lived for many years in great poverty – but it had never shaken his faith in God. One night he dreamed that someone told him to look for a treasure in Prague, under the bridge that leads to the king's palace. Inspired by this dream, he decided to take the long journey. But when Rabbi Eizik arrived in Prague, and saw the bridge, he realized that he was in the midst of a great city, that there were many people around and the bridge was heavily guarded. He couldn't just start digging without being noticed. And so he walked back and forth around the bridge, and around it, for several days. Eventually one of the guards noticed him, and came over and asked him what he was doing. Rabbi Eizik admitted that in a dream he had been told that there was a great treasure buried under the bridge that leads to the king's palace in Prague. The guard laughed! He said, "Because of a dream you wore out your shoes to walk all those miles! Poor fellow! Dreams don't mean a thing. If I believed in dreams, I would have long ago gone to Krakow, to dig for treasure under the stove of a Jew – a man named Eizik, the son of Yekel. I can just imagine how I would find him – in Krakow half the Jews are named Eizik and the other half are named Yekel!" And he laughed again. Rabbi Eizik thanked the man

for his advice, traveled home, dug up the treasure from under his own stove, and with the treasure he built a school and synagogue.

The circle brought Rabbi Eizik back to his own home and hearth. Where is your treasure buried? It is wherever you are. If you can't find it in your own home, in your own heart, you can travel the world and never find it.

And if circles can bring us back home to our center, they can also bring reconciliation. My Aunt Ethel was always the "wild one" among my parents' generation. Unlike my Methodist minister father and church organist mother, Aunt Ethel smoked, drank alcohol, and wore makeup. She even knew how to tell an off-color joke. As a child, I thought this was all pretty wild. And she had tragedy in her life. She loved her husband, Fred, but he drank heavily and could be undependable when he was on a drinking binge. He would promise to pick Ethel and the kids up somewhere, and just never show up. He would come home drunk and fall down the basement stairs, and when Ethel went downstairs and picked him up to put him to bed, he'd beat her up. One time he fell down the stairs drunk and she left him there. He was dead in the morning when she went to see how he was.

How did she deal with it all? When she was in her nineties she wrote the story of her life, the good and the bad, and self-published the book. She sent copies to all of her relatives. She said she wanted everyone to know the truth. It was her way of making peace with the past.

If you have lived long enough, it's almost inevitable that you have suffered hurts and losses. Sometimes we are the ones who have made mistakes or committed the wrongs, and need to make amends, if we can make amends without hurting the person further. If we don't make peace with the past we will never make peace with ourselves. And that restlessness of the soul will drain our energies, energies that could be used for working, for playing and for loving.

Our life journeys are circles, from beginning to end – circles within circles. But when the circle brings you around again, it's never exactly the same. Our triumphs and losses are never really gone. We revisit them time and again, and feel those emotions again. But when we come back around it is a little different each time. And each time a sad memory comes back, every time the hurt comes back, we find ourselves a little stronger. The late Gene Clark of the folk-rock group The Byrds wrote in his song "Full Circle:"

Funny how the circle turns around,
First you're up, and then you're down again.
Though the circle takes what it may give,
Each time around it makes it live again.

Funny how the circle is a wheel
And it can steal someone who is a friend.
Funny how the circle takes you flying
And if it's right, it brings you back again.

As we journey home, we become who we are, but perhaps never knew we were. Marilyn Sewell says, "We open the eye of the heart. We remove the barrier between subject and object and so become one with the others and with the earth. The journey is a circle, with each round of the circle bringing us closer to home."

A story about the Hasidic leader Zusia of is told in the book, The Storytelling Coach. Once, the great Hasidic leader, Zusia, came to his followers. His eyes were red with tears, and his face was pale with fear.

"Zusia, what's the matter? You look frightened!"

"The other day I had a vision. In it, I learned the question that the angels will ask me one day about my life."

His followers were puzzled. "Zusia, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have

helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?"

Zusia turned his gaze toward the heavens. "I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?' And I have learned," Zusia sighed, "that they will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the Promised Land?'"

Looking him in the eyes, one of his followers demanded, "But what will they ask you?" "They will say to me, 'Zusia, there was only one thing that no power of heaven or earth could have prevented you from becoming.' They will say, 'Zusia, why weren't you Zusia?'"

It is a question for every one of us. There is only one person you or I can be. Will we be who we ought to be?

Amen.