

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
February 8, 2009
Mark1:29-39

“Get Back in the Circle”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

In the ninth room in the Gallery of Medea where Greek and Roman sculpture is displayed in the Louvre in Paris there is a statue called “The Three Graces.” This statue, believed to be a pre-Christian temple piece, depicts three naked sisters in a circle with their hands on each other’s shoulders. The sisters are meant to personify grace; their names are Euphrosyne, Aglaea and Thalia. “The Three Sisters of Grace,” as the statue is often called, is believed to represent the circle of grace that is GIVING, RECEIVING, and GIVING BACK AGAIN. These sisters from Greek mythology are captured in the perpetual dance of the beautiful pattern of grace: giving, receiving and giving back again.

Let us hold the image of the three sisters and their representation of grace as giving, receiving, and giving back again as we consider the story in today’s Gospel lesson from the Book of Mark.

Disciples Simon Peter and Andrew were brothers. When Jesus and his followers left the synagogue in Capernaum, we are told that they go directly to the house of Simon and Andrew. There they find Simon’s mother-in-law—a woman who is never named but plays an important role in Jesus’ ministry. Simon’s mother-in-law is in bed with a fever, which probably means she was in a dangerous state, helpless, dehydrated and delirious. Jesus enters her house which was a brave thing to do and very in character with the Jesus we know and love.

Jesus then takes a big risk and defies social, cultural and religious conventions...he takes Simon’s mother-in-law by the hand and lifts her up.
It sounds like something a family member would do.
Jesus acts like family to this very ill woman.

Jesus’ actions defy social, cultural and religious conventions because he should not actually be touching a woman OR a sick person.

In Jesus' time it was considered sinful for men to touch women outside the family and it was unheard of to touch a sick person outside the family. It was believed that both sin and illness were contagious and could be transmitted through touch. Jesus entering this home and then touching a gravely ill woman is intentional on his part and powerful for his followers to witness. The message Jesus is conveying with his nonconformity to social, cultural and religious norms is that GRACE is contagious and if he touches this woman, he will spread his love and grace and she will be healed.

Grace is contagious.

That is a message we may need to hear again and again.

The three sisters of grace in the Greek statue in the Louvre remind us with their dance frozen in time that the reason grace is contagious is that grace when fully expressed creates more grace as it moves through the world felt but unseen.... the three sisters of grace symbolize the beautiful circle of grace—that of giving, receiving and giving back again—and how grace accumulates and multiplies as it spins in larger and larger circles.

The circle of grace is clearly evident in the Gospel story of Jesus and Simon's mother-in-law—not only in Jesus' actions but in the immediate response of the healed woman as well.

Listen again to the progression of events...

*As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew,
with James and John.*

*Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever,
and they told him about her at once.*

*He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.
Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

Some scholars have argued that this healing simply returned Simon's mother-in-law to a place of subjugation in a patriarchal society. But it feels to me that this woman was thankful, that she was filled with grace, and that she took her place in the circle of grace—having received she now gave back by serving a meal. The woman's life had been saved, she had received what she needed, she was grateful, and she gave back by doing what she could, offering what she had, continuing the circle of grace that she had experienced.

The meal Simon's mother-in-law served that night was like the meal that Martha and Mary served after Jesus saved their brother Lazarus. Or the meals that outcasts

like Zacchaeus served after being welcomed as friends. These meals were part of the circle of grace: I have received and now I give back.

Just like the three sisters captured in the statue, dancing the circle of giving, receiving, and giving back again, those around Jesus participated in the circle of grace receiving from Jesus and giving back what they could and what they had.

Earlier in our worship service today we sang together, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” and that is our question for today. Are we continuing the circle of grace in our lives? Do we understand that the circle of grace Jesus demonstrated with his own life—giving, receiving, and giving back again—is the model for our lives as well?

*Will the circle be unbroken, by and by Lord, by and by,
There's a better way to live now, we can have it if we try.
I was singing with my sisters, I was singing with my friends,
And we all can sing together, 'cause the circle never ends.*

Jesus demonstrates this ongoing circle in his life with his choices and his witness. He gives and gives AND HE ALSO receives and receives. One way Jesus regularly RECEIVES is that he often goes off by himself to pray...

*In the morning, while it was still very dark,
Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.*
Mark 1:35

And also

*...now more than ever, the word about Jesus spread abroad;
many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases.
But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.*
Luke 5:15-16

Jesus gives and gives AND HE ALSO receives and receives. He goes off alone to pray AND he accepts the hospitality of those around him who care for him. Jesus has no home and no paid work. He is dependent on those he meets, those in village after village who provide him with food and housing. And so the circle of grace continues.

*Will the circle be unbroken, by and by Lord, by and by,
There's a better way to live now, we can have it if we try.*

Once we understand the circle of grace as giving, receiving and giving back again, we may ask: who is included in the this circle?

The Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke speaks to that question in his writing. “I live my life in ever widening circles,” Rilke wrote in the early 1900s. The circle of grace begins with the small circle of our family and friends, but we push the circle wider and wider as we grow and as our faith deepens. The circle grows to include our church family, and the wider community, and those mis-labeled as “strangers” who are friends we have not yet met, and those in distant lands, and even, as we push the circle wider and wider, those we have been told are our enemies. “I live my life in ever widening circles,” Rilke said, and that reflects the circle of grace.

We give and we receive and we give back again—this fluid motion captured in the dance that Euphrosyne, Aglaea and Thalia are doing as they delight in their circle of love. Like the three sisters, we long to be part of the circle of grace because it gives our life meaning, connects us with the divine Spirit, and places us among our brothers and sisters who followed Jesus and learned from him to give, receive and give back again.

The amazing circle of grace is also reflected in the hymn we will sing to close our worship service today,

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind but now I see.*

I see that the circle of grace allows me to give what I have, receive what I need, and give back again.

I see that the circle of grace helps me meet my needs, and then use my gifts, talents and strengths in the service of God.

I see that the circle of grace does not say give until you are empty and depleted, it says receive with joy and give back in abundance.

*I once was lost but now am found
Was blind but now I see.*

My dear friend and colleague the Rev. John Webster, who many of you know and love, tells a wonderful story about the circle of grace. Apparently John’s wife Phyllis told him that her mother believed that love, acts of generosity, kindness and attention move in circles in families. When the young Phyllis or one of her sisters became whiney or demanding or voiced something all of us with siblings have probably said like, “Gina gets everything,” Phyllis’ mother would simply say,

“Get back in the circle.” John says she meant: get back inside the awareness that love, generosity and attention move in a dynamic circle in this family. Get back in the circle of giving and receiving—your turn to receive will come up soon.

“Get back in the circle.” It is a good message for us today.

Jesus gave and gave and received and received and gave back again. Simon’s mother-in-law received and immediately began to serve. Rather than view her service as subjugation we can understand it as springing forth from a grateful heart. Simon’s mother-in-law chose to get back in the circle of grace....giving, receiving, giving back again.

This Church family knows a lot about giving, receiving and giving back again. Just this week three angels not named Euphrosyne, Aglaea and Thalia but named Cindy, Jackie and Nicole brought wood to Gloria and Fred so they could have warming in their fireplace on cold winter days; and angles named Barb and Mike slipped me six more Big Y Gift Cards to distribute to those in need; and angels named Carol, Doug and Maureen quickly moved Jennifer and her cats out of her house when, due to a leaky roof, Jennifer’s wet walls froze in the cold spell; and an angel named Deb organized a dinner meal to be delivered to a Church member having surgery on Monday; and an angel named Sally drove to Chicopee to pick up Diane and Monica to make sure they could be part of the membership ceremony this morning in Church.

And that is JUST THIS PAST WEEK.

Will the circle be unbroken by and by Lord by and by?
Not in this Church.

We understand that if you get back in the circle, the love, caring, healing, and GRACE that you extend in your own life will circle back around.

“What goes around comes around,” I have heard people say.

Jesus may not have put it quite that way, but basically John Webster’s mother-in-law did when she told her daughters to get back in the circle.

And Simon’s mother-in-law understood that what goes around comes around—that the circle will not be broken if each of us does our part: giving, receiving and giving back again.

And so we remember to get back in the circle of grace when we are feeling dejected, unloved or alone.

We remember that we are part of a circle that will not be broken if we continue to give, receive and give back again.

And we remember Rilke's simple and beautiful words that can help guide our own lives: "I live my life in ever widening circles."

Thank you for being a part of my ever-widening circle,
and for showing me over and over and over again what grace can do.

Amen.