GOING ROUND IN CIRCLES

Commit to Community

Texts: Exodus 18:1-23

For the past few weeks we’ve been talking about some of the major tools God uses to design our life for the good and what we can do to cooperate with that. We’ve talked about the way he uses the CULTURE in which we grow up to shape us or call for a response from us. We’ve explored the huge role that discovering our CALLING has in orienting our lives. We looked at the way CONFLICT offers us the chance to refine our character in sometimes painful but very needed ways. Last week we reflected on the role that COMMUNION with God has in defining and designing us. Today, we’re going to think about the role that the instrument of COMMUNITY plays in the shaping of our lives and do so be considering again a lesson from the life of Moses.

The Imprisoning Circle

When we meet him in Exodus 18 today, Moses is already a man whose life has been powerfully shaped by particular experiences of community. Though born a Jew, Moses spent most of his early life in a royal Egyptian family. Being part of that community taught Moses many leadership skills that would be invaluable in his later life. But it also got him fairly accustomed to having things his own way and that would both hamper him and injure others in the years ahead. Because he was somewhere between an adopted child and a step-child, that created issues for Moses too. I mean his real Mom lived down the road and he saw her sometimes. But he lived in the house of Pharoah, who wasn’t really his Dad. There was this Jewish part of him and this Egyptian part of him. So, what do you think? Could this be why anxiety and anger become a haunting theme in Moses’ life?

The circle we grow up in exerts an enormous influence on us too, doesn’t it? The family that raises us gives us both stars and scars, valuable gifts and certain liabilities. A lot of what you encounter in your spouse or your friends or your workmates and neighbors – even the people behind the counter and on the news and overseas -- is because of the power of that first community. And many people just keep going round that circle. Even when we’re in a new community – a different family, another school, a new workplace, another friendship group -- we’re often still looping on the issues of that first circle or some other one that was very difficult for us. Wherever we go, there WE are.

Maybe we’re still trying to get attention or praise. Perhaps we’re still trying to hide from being injured by the emotional swings of others, or are blasting people with our emotions because that’s what we saw patterned, or can’t find a feeling because we learned to bury them. Maybe we’re still trying to please others or organize the people around us. Perhaps we lost hope there of ever
really having a voice or got the mistaken impression that our voice mattered more than others. Maybe we’re still afraid to risk or, on the opposite side, don’t recognize limits because in that early circle there weren’t enough boundaries. As I shared in our message on CONFLICT, I’m still trying to look competent even when I’ve messed up badly!

Pete Scazzero was one of the most publicly effective pastors in America. His New York City church was booming. His sermons were being circulated everywhere. His parishioners loved him. But his wife had stopped coming to his church. “I can’t go to a church where the guy up there is not the guy I’m really married to.” And thus began Pete’s journey back to the circle of his original family, and into the circles of his parents’ families, that resulted in the radical transformation of Pete’s life and then that of his present family and entire church. You can read about it in his amazing book, EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY SPIRITUALITY.

Here’s my point: One of the most important tasks of life is becoming self-aware about how we have been shaped by all the communities we’ve been a part of – but especially our family of origin. Some of us are a bit blind to that at the moment. But at some point, all of us need to go back to Egypt and sort out what happened there. We’ll need to name some hard realities. We’ll need to forgive some complex people. We’ll need to own our scars and really claim with gratitude our stars and move forward with God into all the new possibilities of the future because God wants us out of the loops we often get stuck in. He wants to break our manacles and take us out of Egypt, so we can be healthier and of better use to his good purposes. “The spirit of the Lord is upon me,” said Jesus. “He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the captives free” (Luke 4:18).

So... What have YOU taken with you from that first community in your life? What are the gifts you need to keep giving thanks for? What are the issues that you need to keep going to God and others to get help with along the way? Dare to believe this: You are in the hands of the God of Exodus and he can help you to a new land.

The Life-Giving Circle

As many of you know from your reading of the Bible, when Moses first leaves Egypt himself, it isn’t an Exodus at all. He’s still messed up in all kinds of ways and hasn’t begun to do the work to transform that. A short while ago, he’d killed an Egyptian slavemaster in a crime of passion. Now he’s on the run. He’s a guy with no circles except the chains inside of him. He’s not a part of the Egyptian community or the Jewish community anymore. He’s just a fugitive in no man’s land (Exo 2:15). But as Moses is wandering out in what was called the wilderness of Midian, God leads him to an oasis where he meets a band of
seven sisters who’ve come to water their father’s flock (Exo 2:16). All of a sudden, a surly group of shepherds comes along and start creating trouble. But Moses, as you may recall, is a military man. He stands up to the rogues, chases them away, andreassembles the flock (Exo 2:17).

Well, the girls go back and report that their father that they’ve been rescued by this handsome stranger. And it turns out that their dad, Jethro, is a Priest of Midian, a God-fearing, wise and and compassionate man. He is the father figure that Moses never had. Jethro takes Moses into the Midianite clan and gives him a good job in his family business. He entrusts his daughter Zipporah to Moses as his wife. It’s there in that redemptive circle that the scars of his former painful circle start to heal. At last Moses belongs to a stable community where there is stability, integrity, and love. It is while Moses is going round in this circle that he becomes able to hear the voice of God. God calls him to go now and rescue others from Egypt and Moses his healthy enough now to answer the summons.

I hope you’ve been in a life-giving circle like that. I remember when I found myself welcomed into a Christian community after my life fell apart as a teenager and felt the embrace of stability, integrity, and love. It was through those people and others that followed that God began to help me look at who I’d become and how I’d become that way. It was in community that God helped me to start to work on many of the scars and self-inflicted wounds I’d picked up in my earlier circles. Everywhere I went after that, I looked for a new small circle of community like that redemptive one and if I couldn’t find it right away, I tried to start one.

Almost every week, and sometimes most every day, for more than thirty years now, I have purposely and perseveringly searched out and rooted my life in a circle like Moses found in Midian. I’ve been part of close-knit prayer groups and Bible study groups and Christian workgroups. I’ve bound myself to a Christian wife and prioritized spending time with Christian friends and a larger Christian community like this one, NOT because there is great virtue in me. But for the opposite reason. I have made very little progress in the refinement of my character or the development of my faith or the flourishing of my family or workplace by my individual effort. Almost all the progress I’ve seen in the areas of life that matter most has come from the power of what God did in a circle. Jesus once said: “Wherever two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Mat 18:20). And I know that’s true. I hope We will never find on our own or in the large crowd going by the awesome power for living that we’ll find in the sort of true spiritual family that is “church” in its more intimate forms.

A Circle of One

I think it’s important to remember and keep returning to this truth. We live in a
time when despite all our social media, coffee-shops, apparent points of unity around celebrity and sports and TV shows, so many people still live somewhat solitary lives, still keep going round the imprisoning circles alone. They may be in families and large groups and workplaces and even churches, but they feel alone. In his book, THE ROAD TO CHARACTER, New York Times columnist David Brooks cites voluminous research to support this. People today have fewer close friendships and report a higher level of loneliness and express a lower level of trust in others than just a few decades ago. Google’s algorithms were employed to identify which words are being used more frequently and which less frequently. “Over the past few decades there has been a sharp rise in the usage of individualist words and phrases like ‘self’ and ‘personalized,’ ‘I come first’ and ‘I can do it myself,’ and a sharp decline in words like ‘community,’ ‘share,’ ‘united,’ and ‘common good.’” (pp. 257-258)

This sort of increasing isolation, this shrinking of life into what is effectively a “Circle of One” doesn’t just happen to selfish, narcissistic people. It happens to good and gracious people – even to people who’ve been part of a real life-giving circle at some other point in their life. Take Moses, for example. When we meet him in Exodus 18, it is long after he’d been part of that Midianite community that God used for such good in his life. Strengthened by that experience, Moses has gone back to Egypt and led the children of Israel out of bondage.

But now Moses is leading the Israelites through the wilderness on what is literally a million-person march. Along the way, Moses is heading up the justice system. He is wearing himself out trying to judge each of the cases that need resolution. Trying to do this alone, he’s become a bottleneck to the movement of cases through the system. And it’s then that his old small group leader, Jethro, comes to Moses and shares the truth he hasn’t been able to see in the blindness of his isolation: “The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.” (Exo 18:18). Jethro goes on to describe a model for doing leadership in community and through a community that changes both Moses’ life and that of Israel for the good.

**Invitation to the Circle**

How many other people are carrying a work that is too heavy for them? A personal history and scars? A set of character or relational or financial challenges? A distorted image of God or others? An emotional or psychological trauma that might get better or even be transformed if we could help them out of Egypt and into Midian? Would there be as many shootings, suicides, divorces, addictions, secularists, lost spouses, parents, or kids, if there were more of these life-giving circles where several gather and Jesus is there with them?

So, let me land this conversation with THREE PRACTICAL ENCOURAGEMENTS
for you as we prepare to go. FIRST: If you are part of a Christian circle, invite someone new in. Share the blessing; don’t keep it to yourself. Jethro didn’t need to, but he made a place for a broken man and he became the leader of a nation.

SECONDLY: Take the role you play within your existing circles even more seriously. Whether that’s your home, your Christian small group, your workgroup or elsewhere. Be truly present to people. Listen deeply to the heart beneath their words. Encourage people regularly, mindful that all of us are in a great battle with many things. Bear witness to God’s work in the sinful areas of your character. If you see someone stuck in a pattern that isn’t working well for them or others, help them see it – the way Jethro did for Moses.

FINALLY: If you aren’t part of a circle of intentional spiritual growth or ministry service, join one. Stop by the GROW or SERVE stations in the Commons today or speak to any of our pastors and we’ll help you make a connection that could truly become one of the most powerful ways that God further designs your life for the good.

Let’s pray together...

God, we know that Jethro was right: “The work is too heavy for us; we cannot handle it alone.” Help us to find and build and open up circles of your life-changing love that help us and others out of Egypt and into Midian and toward the Promised Land. In the name of Jesus we pray, and those in the circle said, “Amen.”