

## **A Circle Is Broken**

**Acts 10: 44-48**

Will the circle be unbroken bye and bye? My mother's family were miners in the southwest Virginia mountains. Mountain life was harsh and there was not much to hope for – little chance for a better life. The role of religion was to point to a better place to come. Families were torn apart as younger generations left to find work, to find a future. They were torn apart by the early death of parents and of children. The hope that remained was that the family circle of love would remain intact in that better place—heaven where the circle would be unbroken bye and bye.

The circles of our lives are relationships. They are places of intimacy and acceptance where we discover who we are, where we grow, and where we feel safe. Communities are circles. Families certainly are circles. Faith communities are circles of loving relationship where we can find nurturing support, meaning for life, and personal identity. From time to time, these circles are broken apart and broken open and we have to deal with the changes.

The Bible is our family story. The book of Acts describes the change that took place early in the life of the disciples Jesus left behind. That change is exemplified by the story of the Apostle Peter (Acts 10). This particular story began with Peter, while praying, had a vision that God was offering him some non-kosher food. Thinking this was a test, Peter refused, whereupon he heard, “what God has made clean (kosher), don't you call unclean.” So Peter traveled to the home of a Gentile family and shared with them the story of Jesus. They become so filled with the Holy Spirit that Peter was prompted to offer a rhetorical question: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” The obvious answer was that no one can.

Certainly Jesus would not limit the full inclusion of Gentiles in the circle of Christianity. The circle of Judaism, the source of identity and nurture, was broken open to let in Gentiles. This breaking enabled Christianity, at least eventually, to become a universal faith.

The Bible is the family story for the Jews. With Jesus, it has become the family story for Christians as well. Followers of the way of Jesus quickly discovered that one important implication of Jesus' life and teaching is that everyone is “in.” We're all the in-group. That realization challenged people like Peter and provided an opportunity for the early church to define itself differently -- as a universal faith. We have the opportunity, and the challenge, today to continue doing this in spite of the history of the Christian church. We are still called to be builders and also breakers of circles.

Some breaking of circles happens to us from outside ourselves. There are changes in the culture around us: demographics, scientific advances, multi-cultural societies, a greater knowledge of other religious and philosophies, and a new attitude that we can just pick and choose what we believe. These and other changes have resulted in a breaking open of the circle of the Christian church. There is new wine that can't be contained by old and familiar wineskins.

Some breaking of the circle just happens to us, yet many are choosing to break open circles in the church today. They are doing this by embracing and supporting issues such as women in pastoral leadership, homosexual pastors and leaders fully embraced, separation of church and state, and of course new insights in biblical studies based on archeology and the best new scholarship. When we embrace these new realities of freedom and faith, we discover that we have just gotten back to following Jesus.

Building and breaking circles happens in our personal and family lives as well as in the church. When I was eleven years old, my family moved to the little town of Vienna, Virginia and we joined Vienna Baptist Church. I stayed connected with the people of that church despite moving away, then going to college, graduate school, and seminary. At the age of twenty-eight, I fulfilled something of a life dream when I joined the staff of Vienna Baptist Church as the Pastoral Associate for Music, Arts, and Drama & Missions. This happened just after my mother's death I felt her spirit was happy with my becoming a pastor on the staff of our home church.

My wife Kathy came with me on my full circle. For fifteen years I worked hard and grew the ministry of music, arts, and drama larger and more diverse. I helped the missions ministry grow larger and more involved. I went to Haiti and to Moscow. After the first ten years, I added youth ministry to my responsibilities because that was needed. I initiated a program of summer youth mission trips. Kathy joined the staff of our music ministry.

For fifteen years I drew circle of Vienna Baptist Church tightly about me. Kathy and I brought our two children into that circle and Vienna Baptist became their home church. I baptized both of them there. I also helped plan, build, and finance a new building and sanctuary along with the congregation. I married many young friends and buried many older friends. I invested myself deeply.

After fifteen years, the senior pastor retired. Clearer in my call to be the pastor of a church, I cautiously mentioned myself as a candidate to be the new senior pastor. The search committee told me, "You can't be the candidate. That would be divisive." I chose not to become a candidate to be senior pastor of Vienna Baptist Church. I felt hurt and rejected. I imagine you understand that feeling of being rejected or dismissed by an organization, perhaps and church, that you so desperately wanted to serve and embrace.

My circle broken, I began the search process that led me to Kansas City and to Crossroads Church. The result of my broken circle was that I discovered a whole new dimension of my calling. I found a vision, "to change the world by changing the church." The Crossroads congregation experienced breaking some of their circles and began discovering whole new possibilities for its life: to lead followers of Jesus to discover how to be faithful to the Jesus' Way today. The congregation is discovering a mission of helping other communities of faith to stand firmly and live boldly with the compassion and freedom to which Christ calls us.

Because of the circles I've built in my lifetime, I know what it is to trust, love, and be accepted. Because of the circles that have broken, I have discovered my own unique voice and perspective. I have learned not to fear questions and the not knowing. I have learned to prefer honest questioning, even when it threatened to descend into chaos, over manufactured certainty that has the appearance but not the substance of faith. I have found a voice through my *Ask Jack* sermon series and I have a book coming out soon. It will be titled *Finding Faith*. All this is because a circle was broken and because of new circle was built.

I have learned to build and embrace the circles that embrace me with love. Community helps us find the ability to trust and learn -- also to embrace the lessons of broken circles that let in so

much that is new and that enriches us. If, in that learning, we choose to fill our lives with actions and people that break open our circles, then that new wine of the Spirit will fill us with divine love and a prophetic mission. I know that Crossroads Church is a circle of warmth, support, acceptance, and love. Let us keep choosing the journey of newness. Let us keep choosing to grow through our brokenness and break through our fear. Let us become a people who follow Jesus in this day and age and who invite others to join us in the dance in Jesus' name.