

Lecture: Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

Let me begin this morning with a simple statement and two stories. The simple statement is this: Never trust a box. Boxes are bad. Always trust a circle. Circles are good.

And now for the stories: Story one. Several years ago, in New York City, the entire Union Square Subway station was evacuated and emergency personnel from all over the city responded. Taped on the walls and hidden under subway benches were dozens of small boxes with the word “fear,” inscribed on them. Fire fighters, police officers, the bomb squad, the “Haz Mat” people—all of them—responded. For hours, the whole subway system of New York City was shut down. Hundreds of thousands of people were inconvenienced. As it turned out, the boxes were empty. As it turned out, the boxes were a performance art project by a New York University film student who had intended to film people’s reaction to the boxes. The whole city was in a panic because of a few empty boxes. Boxes are bad.

Story two, forty-two years ago, a loving mother from Ohio sent a care package to her very homesick son in Germany. In the same care package, his little sister included three large bottles of bubble blowing solution along with the cookies and the other goodies as her

contribution to her big brother. One spring afternoon, a few weeks later, that student and a few of his friends sat on an open balcony above the main street of Heidelberg Germany and started to blow bubbles. Bubbles are round. Bubbles are beautiful. Pedestrians stopped, cars stopped. Even the streetcars stopped and the conductors and the motormen and many of the passengers got off the streetcars. Nearly everyone passing along the Main Street of that small German city took a few minutes out of their busy day to watch bubbles and chase bubbles in the early spring sunshine. Bubbles are circles and circles are good.

I begin with those stories today, because I want to invite you to think with me about the circle as a way of life—the circle as a way to live into the new year, the circle as an invitation to renewal, hope and promise. And my text for this morning, is the entire Bible.

Several years ago, I actually kept a New Year's Resolution. Along with a group at my congregation in New York City, we read the Bible from cover to cover—we started it on January 1 and some of us finished reading it on New Year's Eve.

And on reflection, after that experience, I decided that if I could sum the whole Bible up in a very simple form, it would be to say that God is trying to tell people that circles are good and boxes are bad. Fifteen hundred pages of prophecy, poetry, history and proclamation

summed up in one sentence is a little scary, but let me tell you what I have in mind.

Almost every single bad thing in the entire sweep of biblical history is about a box. Categories, cages, corners, conquests, crucifixions, condemnations and the way of death are all boxes. Pharaoh put the children of Israel in a box called slavery. Crafting and worshipping idols is about putting God in a box. Killing other people and hating them just because of who they are is about putting them in a box. Hanging Jesus on a cross was about putting him in a box—literally, hate attempting to put the truth in a box.

On the other hand, almost every single good thing in the entire sweep of biblical history is about circles. Invitations, liberations, resurrections, rebirths, affirmations and the way of life are all circles. Moses broke the box of slavery when he said let my people go. The prophets talked about a God who was beyond all categories and classifications. The Psalmists sang about a God whose love was as large as the universe and as intimate as the encircling arms of a caring shepherd enfolding a lamb. And the people, who put Jesus in the grave, could not keep him there, because that grave was a box and the power of God is about the circle of amazing grace setting us free by the wonder of love. Circles are about you and me being reborn and set free by the power of that love.

And so let me talk a little about circles and about the past and about the future. Think with me for a bit about the things you regret in your past. Most of the things I regret about my past involve boxes of one sort or another.

For example, if I have failed to see the beauty of another person it was because I put them in a box, it was because I classified them and somehow failed to see them as the unique, non-repeatable creation of a loving God.

If I lost my patience or my perspective, it was because I allowed some old box—some old attitude of heart or mind to cloud my judgment. In those moments, I pull from a box of bad memories a rotten self image that allows me to think that I am so much less than the beloved child of God who I know myself to be at my best moments.

And then the very worst thing of all, if I lost any days in my past, it was because I could not begin those days with that great circle of praise, -- “this is the day which the Lord has made”. My lost days were those days I boxed up and muddled through and fooled myself into believing that that day was just another repetition of the same old, same old. And that is the boxy reality of the past. Boxes are bad—but that’s not the whole story.

Someone pointed out to me recently that the human being is the only one of God’s creatures who builds boxes. And while I love my

square house, and enjoy living in a boxy city, and sleeping in a wonderful rectangular bed, whenever I love it the most and speak closest to the heart, I think of my home as my cocoon and my safe haven and my bed as my nest—round images everyone!

Do you remember that Jesus said: Consider the lilies. Consider the birds of the air with their wonderful freedom to fly and their round nests. Consider the universe with its infinite distances without a single limiting box or corner. Consider that love is the only thing that always grows when you give it away like the ripples of a pebble tossed into the water. Consider if you will that if we are truly spiritual creatures on an earthly journey, then it is our spiritual challenge to transcend the box bound nature of our humanity and strive toward the mystical circle of God's love.

Please forgive me now for being a little obtuse and slightly philosophical, because I am having difficulty with the idea that the truth about your future and mine could be as simple as the difference between a circle and a box. But let me try to explain.

If you, like me, sometimes find yourself stuck in the box of the past with its classifications and categories, about your own life, other people and the world, then God in Jesus Christ, is inviting you to join me in trusting circles!

Because you see, circles are about community and compassion for us and for others. And that's what we need and that's what the world

needs. No one you will meet in the days ahead is anything other than a precious child of God. To see them as anything less is to nail them into the box of prejudice and fear.

You've all heard of the idea of six degrees of separation—how everyone on the earth really knows everyone else—well my idea is not six degrees of separation—but six degrees of connection--connection is a circle of compassion which begins when you and I take Jesus at his word and love not only the lovable, but the unlovable and the downright despicable as well.

Six degrees of connection is understanding yourself today as standing in a circle of God's love which grows each time you connect with a sister or a brother as God's child. And it begins here and it begins today—when you trust circles—those circles grow!

And that growth leads somewhere. It leads to peace and justice. Peace in the heart to be sure—but peace in the world as well. Right now, you and I are citizens of a country just ending farsightedly long war and still involved in another, with some of our political candidates and former leaders urging us to take on Iran with some sort of preventive strike.

I do not pretend to have answers for the profound dilemmas faced by our leaders in their deliberations, but I do have a word of warning. War is about lines, battle lines, lines of credit, oil pipe lines and political hard lines—and lines are the building blocks of boxes

and the scariest box of all is the one labeled “enemy”—because when one nation places another nation in that box—it becomes possible to lose sight of the circle of humanity which holds us all together and once we lose sight of that, we are only one step away from the worst box of all—the box named death.

And I guess its all about making a commitment. I like to say that when we baptize children (as we did this morning), that you and I hold a mortgage on those children’s future. I like to believe that when I love and when I act for justice in this world, I make payments for the sake of my children’s future and the future of every child on the earth. And here’s the commitment I think we need to make: in the days ahead, test everything you think and everything you say and every action you take to see if it’s a box or a circle.

Mistrust the boxes and embrace the circles. Run away from anything, which looks like a line and divides you from someone else. Welcome any attitude of heart or mind, which helps you grow in your ability to love. Is that too simple? Probably! Is it true? Only as true as the unconditional love of God! And that truth is the truth of life, that truth is one that can be trusted. Amen