

October 18, 2009

Mark 10:35-45

A NEW VISION ON MISSION

Are we too focused and fixated on ourselves?

As the people who makeup this congregation, are we spiritually well?

I want to graphically communicate what this week's text is all about. Let's see visually what the #1 problem of many churches is today. Humor me with this little exercise.

I want to begin by calling about six people up out of the congregation to the front of the sanctuary. Now I will ask you to join hands and form a circle.

You knew exactly what that circle was going to look like. The members will turn inward, facing each other and circle around.

Some will be facing the congregation, some will have their backs to the people, and others will be profile left or right. Wherever they stand, though, the members of this circle are largely looking at each other.

Now I will get tricky. "Is this the only kind of circle you can make?" Can this group of circle-formers decide on "getting closer" to form a "different" circle.

First, move closer together, though still just holding hands. Then every time I urged you to make yet another "different" circle, respond by moving closer and closer.

Now try shoulder-to-shoulder; dropped hands and put your arms around each other; make yourselves into a kind of football-type huddle. (Notice the body language _ a group curved in on itself, in the process of imploding.)

page 2

Finally, one last time try to make still another different circle, Why don't you turn around? Face out, instead of facing in."

With that bit of help, suddenly a whole new kind of circle becomes possible. Still holding hands, form one of these outward-facing circles. What now is your primary view?

In this kind of a circle, you are facing completely away from each other, full-face to those outside the circle.

Now form yet another kind of circle. This time I want each member to stand sideways to the center of the circle. Here your vision looks both ways.

Can you see the person in front of you? Can you also see other members of the circle across from you, as well as having a clear view of people outside the circle?

This is a movement circle, a group of people poised to go somewhere together, with the ability to look in and look out at the same time.

Making a "looking out" rather than "looking in" circle.

Why is that such a strange, radical idea for so many of us? From the time we are little children we are taught that circles face in.

Our inability to even conceive of a different kind of circle should help us to understand the disciple's denseness as Jesus tried to communicate a new concept of mission to his followers.

We may find James' and John's questions about heavenly seating arrangements naive and outrageously ignorant, but these disciples were actually just caught up in making the same old circle.

page 3

The traditional Jewish messiah was to arrive on that last day in glory and power, judging all and ruling all.

Those who had remained loyal and righteous in the eyes of the messiah expected to receive honorable recognition for their stalwart, sterling behavior.

A great and powerful messiah surrounded by his great, distinguished disciples was the vision James and John had nurtured all their lives _ it was the expected way things would precede.

Jesus' message _ of servanthood, suffering, and even death for the sake of others _ was a very different "circle" for the disciples to try to wrap their minds around.

Jesus preached that it was only through saving others, focusing on the powerless, the hopeless, and the insignificant, that a disciple could be called "great."

A truly great disciple, like Jesus himself, would willingly suffer persecutions, expect deceptions and disloyalty, and know death might be the only reward.

No wonder the disciples only wanted to form circles _ i.e., deal with concepts of discipleship _ that just faced inward.

Facing outward put a discipleship of service for others face-to-face with the frightening possibilities of rejection, abuse, failure, even death.

But facing out was the discipleship Jesus preached. Jesus taught that to give up your life is to save it; that the first shall be last and the last first. Now those are very different circles.

Jesus did not teach upward mobility. Jesus taught outward mobility. In fact, Jesus warned about the downward slope of upward mobility. Franklin Church is not in this world to serve and save itself.

page 4

There are far too many churches whose only goal is to survive, to keep safe, and to form circles that look in.

Missionary discipleship denies that there is any need for the church to "just keep going" if it's not "going" anywhere.

The churches (especially the mainline/old churches) have become much too fixated on how to save itself rather than saving the world.

The community of faith, the circle of believing disciples, must face the world with its message.

The difference between an inward-circle faith and an outward-circle faith is the difference between "Churchianity" and "Christianity."

The number of people seeing a psychiatrist each week, for years on end, testifies to the fact that we all feel ourselves to be endlessly fascinating subjects of attention.

There are whole congregations that share this self-fixation.

What would happen if both individually and as a congregation we shook ourselves out of this self-absorption and began to look for the key to our psychological and spiritual health outside ourselves?

Jesus counseled that those who seek to save their lives will lose them. Let us look outside the familiar circle of our own problems, our own concerns, and find healing, wholeness and health in giving ourselves in service to others.

This Sunday we need to renew and reclaim what it means to be a disciple for Christ, what the mission of a community of disciples must be.

page 5

How would our congregation respond if I proposed that everyone form a circle, focusing outward, and then start marching forward?

Now the big test. Is our community of disciples just as willing to march outside the walls of our sanctuary and form that outward-facing circle in the open air, where any and all passing by can see and hear us?

We need to sing! We need to first make sure everyone knows the words, knows the cadence, and feels secure with the message _ after all that too is part of our congregation's mission.

But the goal is to move outside, for if Franklin's circle of disciples can't even make it out the door, how will we move freely on our mission out into the world?

Amen!