

*A Circle Wide for Us and Others Too*

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27, Mark 5:21-43

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*There's a circle spinning on the Potter's wheel. Come and join.*

*With space to laugh, cry, dance, and heal. Come and join.*

*Spinning into a shape that's true. Come and join.*

*A circle wide for us and others too. Come and join.*

This call and response opens many of our youth gatherings at United Church. It's an invitation to gather 'round. A signal that our time to socialize and play games is drawing to a close and our shared time as a group is about to begin. Rather than shout everyone into submission, which I've never been very good at anyway, this gentle transition is one that we share together. It requires all our voices. So long as I start it in a key others can sing along with, Jenny likes to remind me.

This song claims that the divine is making sacred space for all of who we are—right here and now. And it's an acknowledgement that *we* are responsible for shaping this space too. That our encounter with one another will only be as authentic as *we* are—and allow others to be. Practically, it's merely an invitation to form a circle together. But I think the last line is especially important, reminding us to pay close attention to those who are present now and even those who are yet to arrive—a *circle wide for us and others too*.

As we begin dreaming about gathering our community together again this fall, this song has been running on a loop in my mind. Sometimes I close my eyes and try to imagine the faces of those who will “circle up” in that first gathering back in the Youth Room. I'm sure you've done the same your whatever church groups you're a part of too. I even try to remember what the students' voices sound like singing back to me—*come and join*.

Enthusiastic as they sound in my imagination, the truth is that our youth sometimes sing this song begrudgingly. And I get it. It's asking a lot of them—both in the singing itself and through the claims the song makes on the space. It's difficult to open our circle wide enough for others.

In a world where most of *my* time is spent on *my* homework or worrying about how *my* test scores will define *my* career dreams, it's hard to make space for friends, much less others I barely know—and that's not even to mention those I've yet to meet.

The song is a countercultural ritual, a radical invitation, a reminder of something we are prone to forget: that we belong to one another. And that even the circles drawn with the best of intentions—even the communities gathered around the most sacred truths—often leave others out.

We sing the song each time we gather—even begrudgingly—because our *we* is ever-evolving, our circle always shifting. And if we keep our gaze too fixed on what's inside the circle, we'll miss out on the extraordinary possibility waiting to break in. If we get too comfortable with who we are, we'll miss out on the *we* we could be.

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Isn't it striking that the greatest barrier between this unnamed woman and her healing was Jesus' closest followers?

The one with the strongest claim on Christ's power is nearly kept from reaching him by the ones eager to see this very power in action.

These followers of Jesus have drawn a circle drawn around the sacred, yes, but only wide enough for them.

How seamlessly the structures we build to hold the holy become barriers to the freewheeling movement of the sacred. How quickly a circle becomes a dividing line.

Thank God for this woman's audacity. Her stubborn refusal to let this crowd or the cultural and religious limitations imposed upon her stand in her way. Her actions are a heartbreaking testament to her desperation, perhaps, but they also bear witness to that holy and stubborn persistence of life. In reaching out to seize Christ's power, this woman reclaimed her dignity—her agency. And Jesus commended and blessed this stubborn act of faith, sending her forth to seize life just as she had seized his cloak.

I wonder how many in the crowd paid attention to her before Jesus interrupted their procession. I wonder how many saw her bleeding. I wonder how many reached out to help her—or even noticed her desperate push inward from the margins. I wonder how many prioritized her healing—or even grasped that her liberation and very life were at stake.

Christ's power healed her ailing body, yes. But it also pulled her to the center of the crowd that encircled him and out from the shadows of social stigma. It unshackled her from an exploitative healthcare system. It freed her mind, body, and spirit from the weight of fear and gave her sight that cut through the fog of despair.

For the first time in many, many years, this woman could dream and wonder about *a future*, friends. That is no small thing. You see, this woman's healing is only the start of the story, a tale of a life reclaimed that we are left only to imagine.

Her healing reminds us that liberation is only the beginning. It is an interruption of injustice *for the sake of life*. It's only the first most faithful step toward the world Christ tells us is possible—a future worthy of all people's hopes and dreams.

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2,000 years ago, this unnamed woman reached out and made a claim on Christ's power. But as we revisit this familiar passage today, I'm left wondering, "What claim does Christ's power make on us in return?"

Can we reach out and grab hold of the idea that *everyone* deserves a future worthy of their dreams? That *everyone* deserves to belong? That *everyone* deserves the care they need to live in dignity and wholeness?

And—perhaps the most pressing question for the church today—can we tolerate the disruption to our lives and communities that comes as a result of taking these ideas seriously?

Christ's power makes its claims on us through the rejected, the ignored, the outcast, and the overlooked. The ones left out as the crowd presses in. Those who, like the unnamed woman, are reclaiming their dignity, their agency, their liberation, and their healing.

If we as Jesus' followers want to witness Christ's power today, we must remain attentive to those within and outside our circle. We must lend a hand to those who're being crowded out. Or at the very least we'd better get out of their way. Because *their* claim on Christ's power is the priority.

And this might even interrupt the miracle we'd come here hoping to see. It might reconfigure the circle or reorder the priorities we'd grown comfortable with. But the Kingdom often comes through such disordered interruptions. The inbreaking of the Spirit sometimes sounds like the rush of a violent wind. Or comes down like tongues of fire that burn down every barrier to injustice and reduce every oppressive system to ash.

The Poor People's Campaign has a song they use to gather everyone 'round. We sang it together in Raleigh just a few days ago. It says, "*Everybody's got a right to live.*"

You see, our institutions don't have a right to live. Our comfort doesn't have a right to live. "The way we've always done it" doesn't have a right to live.

But our people do. And by *our people* I mean those within our circle and those yet to interrupt and break into it.

I'm talking about those who can't afford to live in our church's neighborhood. Those whose work has been exploited and whose lives have been put at risk throughout this pandemic so that the rich might get richer. Those who've sought asylum and been turned away. Those who've been scolded by our nation's leaders and told "don't come." Those who have been scorned for loving who they love. Those who have been refused access to Christ's table. Those who have been told they'll never preach from a pulpit like this one.

So when workers build power and refuse to return to their jobs for anything less than a living wage, we widen the circle.

When our queer siblings reach out and claim David and Jonathan's love as an affirmation of their presence in our sacred text, we widen the circle.

When our black, brown, and indigenous neighbors demand that this nation reckon with and repair the harm of innumerable broken promises, we widen the circle.

When young people claim their right to a future worth dreaming into. When they demand an end to our violent and exploitative systems that tear at the interdependent fabric of all life on this planet, we widen the circle.

Because everybody's got a right to live!

Because with every interruption of injustice, our circle doesn't break—it just widens. Each time we reach for the hand of a neighbor, or lock arms in solidarity with those striving for liberation. Each time we center the needs of those whose very lives are at stake, our vision of Jesus doesn't get obscured. It gets clearer! We don't lose our place in line; we get even more proximate to his promises fulfilled.

Church, every little interruption of injustice for the sake of life gets us a little closer to seeing Christ's power on full display.

So United Church, as we begin a process of regathering in the months ahead. As we listen deep within and around us to hear Christ's call on our community, we have a choice to make. In our sincere desire to see Christ's power at work, will we circle up, press in, and even inadvertently crowd out those whose lives are at stake. Or will we open the circle wide, reach out to those grasping for healing, and draw them in?

Healing and liberation aren't spectator sports. Christ is looking for co-conspirators in this work. And his power is actively at work in the world, interrupting injustice for the sake of life. We can catch a glimpse of it, together, if only we will draw our circle wide enough—for us and others too.  
*Come and join.*