

WIDENING THE CIRCLE
“OF OUR THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES”

Second in a sermon series by James R. Blades
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My first theological training came through *Campus Crusade for Christ* when I was a new Christian as a college sophomore. One of the things I appreciate about that experience was all the basic exposure I got to the Bible. Having no previous church or theological training, Campus Crusade “put the cookies on the lower shelf” for me, so to speak. They explained things simply.

Then I headed off to seminary which I’ll have to admit was not an easy experience. Those simple Biblical precepts I learned in college got challenged and stretched at every point. Then I became a hospital chaplain and then a pastor, facing the rough and tumble challenges of my own life while trying to help others face theirs. During all these thirty years, God has never let my circles alone; He has kept using those challenges to widen my perspective of life and God and theology. Rarely have these “widening” experiences by painless. Like stretching a muscle or tendon, it has nearly always involve some pain.

Rarely do any of us wake up one day and say, “I think I’ll go out and widen the circle of my theological understanding. Sure, we may toy around with new ideas, but the transformation of our core interpretations of life usually take a crisis to bring about: A crisis of disappointment or disagreement or loss or change.

In the Chinese language, the word for “crisis” is made of a combination of two characters: Danger and Opportunity. The *danger* of crisis is the change it forces upon us, the reality it makes us face. The *opportunity* the way that crises make us widen our circles: the circles of our understanding, of our empathy, of our support networks, of our faith, of our perspective.

Think how this is so. Think first of disappointment.

Think of the disappointments you have faced across the years of your life. Think how those disappointments have stretched the circle of your life perspective.

Here’s this guy named Job in the Hebrew Scriptures. Job is prosperous. Job is influential in his community. Job considers himself a paradigm of the simple religious formula: If you obey God’s rules, God will bless you; do the right thing and good will naturally come your way. But one day hell breaks into in Job’s life: trial after trouble one right after the other. And Job sits on an ash heap wondering what went wrong. He played by all the rules. What does God have against him? Job’s friends sit down with him and offer counsel: “Job, it’s because you did something wrong, broke the rules, pulled the wrong heavenly string; that’s why you’re suffering.” Helpful advice!

If you’ve ever read the Book of Job, you know the outcome. God answers Job out of the whirlwind, answers Job’s fevered questioning. Job never gets an explanation of his suffering. He gets a vision of God’s vast inscrutable providence and wisdom and care.

Then Job answered the LORD and said,

"I know that You can do all things,

And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.

I have declared what I did not understand (things outside the circle of my understanding)
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

'Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me.'

I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You;

Therefore I retract my presumption,
And I repent in dust and ashes."

Where in your life have you encountered very God? Where has the light of God's love and companionship become most real and precious to you? When have the stars of God's heavenly wisdom sparkled most brilliantly in your life? Has it not often been in the dark night of your disappointments?

Now look at another tool that God often uses to widen our circle of perspective: our disagreements.

This may surprise some of you, but I really don't like disagreements. I would rather just get along with everyone, skip the tension and be on everyone's love list. But I can't be true to myself without disagreeing at times. Even Debbie and I disagree and have, shall we say, our spirited debates.

But here's something I have discovered across my years: that the people I disagree with are often the people I learn the most from. I get bored living within the circle of my own fixed perspective. That's why, the past couple of years, I have made a project of reading theologians I don't agree with, studying the history and thought of world religions that are other than my own. Right now, I am finishing a book of Ghandi's life and teachings and reading a daily devotional of Jewish ethics.

Does that scare you? That your pastor is opening himself to un-Christian perspectives? I assure you that I am just as centered as I have ever been within the circle of Christian orthodoxy; but that doesn't mean I can't be enriched by crossing over into someone else's circle to see what they see.

Years ago, in one of my first sermons here, some of you may remember that I quoted a passage from Anne Ortlund's book *Up with Worship*.

"Suppose," she says, "a little boy looks through the knothole of a fence to see a parade. If he sees a clown pass by, he's tickled. If he sees a lion, he's afraid. If there's a space in between, he may think the parade's over. If someone blocks his view, he may think there's no parade at all."¹

Now, says the ancient apostle, we see through a glass darkly. "Now" writes Ann Ortlund, "we see through a knothole."

That captures the opportunity in our disagreements, doesn't it? None of us sees the whole parade. None of us can see the whole vista of reality and truth. We each see through a knothole.

Now suppose I am looking at the parade of life through my knothole and you are looking through yours. As I look through my knothole, I say, "Look! Elephants!"

"Elephants?" you reply as you rub your eyes and look harder through your knothole, "I don't see elephants. I see Shriners on motorcycles." And so our perspectives disagree.

If we both insist that the part of the parade we see through our knothole is the whole parade, we are fitting ourselves for an argument. But if we both have the modesty to admit there is more to the parade than either of us can see and if we are willing to *listen* to each other's description of what we see, we open the **opportunity**, both of us, to widen the circle of our parade perspective.

Disagreement! What a wonderful opportunity to widen our circles of understanding.

Disappointment. Disagreement. Now here's another tool that God can use to widen the circle of our perspective: Disorientation. Let me explain.

¹ Anne Ortlund, *Up With Worship* (Broadman & Holman)

All of life is change and transition, isn't it? Like the old hymn:
Break down,
Take down,
Shake down,
Just about the time you think you've got it made,
You're busted!

And when transition and change come down on us as they inevitably do, what happens? We become disoriented. Here's how it goes: Before the change, we had our circle set. We were oriented: knew just where the boundaries were, where the furnishings were. We were accustomed. Then change came along that shattered our circle or threw us into a different circle where things weren't customary and familiar. We became *disoriented*. And what were we forced to do? We had to draw a new circle to embrace the change; we had to become familiar with the changed furnishings. We became, in the words of theologian Walter Brueggemann, *reoriented*.

And when we became reoriented what do we discover has happened to us? We find our circle of understanding of life or events or people or cultures widened. We find we had strengths we didn't know we had.

Change can do that to you. It can be a terrible threat. We all know that. Or it can be an opportunity to be enlarged as a person. How many people I have known whose change of job, change of marital status, change of living standard, change of location, at first frightful and unnerving, made them discover new strengths in themselves, new facets of God's character, new opportunities they might never otherwise have discovered.

I think of birth of the Church in the first chapters of Acts. Thousands came to Christ through the apostles' early preaching. The disciples rejoiced, it says, in the power of God and the favor of all the people as they broke bread with each other from house to house. That was the life to which the early Church quickly became oriented. But then came the crisis! James the apostle was murdered and persecution broke out. No more favor with the people. No more fellowship from house to house. No more worshipping in public. The Christian community in Jerusalem scattered. To Samaria. To Syria. To Egypt. And guess what they did in their scattering? They brought the Gospel to those places.

The implication is clear. God didn't send the crisis of persecution that broke their cozy Jerusalem church circle. People did that. But God used the crisis! To what end? To widen the circle of the Church's message and influence.

Widening the Circle is our church's ministry theme for the coming year. Widening the Circle to embrace those outside these walls. Widening the Circle of our Global involvement. Widening the Circle of our Care of God's world. Widening the Circle of our theological perspective. They are all rather tied together aren't they?

One more thing needs to be said; something very important! While everyone has experiences of disappointment, disagreement and disorientation, not everyone grows from them. There is one thing that will keep us from growing: Disengagement!

Here's a young man, for instance whose dreams have been shattered. He didn't get the opening he wanted or the job he wanted or the woman he wanted or the health he wanted. Life has not dealt him the hand he expected. Now he has a choice. He can disengage and get bitter at God and life; throw down his cards and say, "I'm through playing," quit the faith or the church or trying or hoping. Or he can stay engaged, stay in the game, play out the hand he has been dealt and grow and learn and be enlarged by it.

Here are two other people with a disagreement. Perhaps it's about theology or politics or perspective or preference. One sees things one way and the other another way. They have a

choice. They can stay engaged with each other; continue to listen to each other, even while they continue to disagree. Or they can disengage. Quit the relationship. Then all learning is over.

Here is a woman who has lost her husband. He handled the finances. He took care of the car. He was there to listen at the end of the day. Now he's gone and she feels disoriented. She chooses to embrace the challenge, hard as it is. As time goes on, she becomes reoriented; finds strengths she did not know she had, friendships she did not know she needed, the strength not to shut ignore her pain but enlarging herself to encompass it.

The crucial difference in every case is a choice: the choice between expanding or contracting, growing or withering, continuing or quitting; the choice between engagement or disengagement.

Which leads to a question: Why are we here as a church at this corner of Marsh and Morro? What are we to the community? To the world? How do they, out there, see us? Do they see a grand old building, an official historic landmark of San Luis Obispo? Or do they see a vibrant faith community:

A sanctuary to those who have been stung by the disappointments of life, who have questions about God and faith, who are looking for a safe place to sort that out.

A role model to a warring and divided world of what it looks like when people who disagree stay engaged with each other, still listen and learn from their differing perspectives.

A beacon of divine direction and Biblical guidance for those disoriented by the onslaught of life's changes. I tell you that there will be an increasing number of them in the days ahead! The Rock of faith at Marsh and Morro: that is the vision this church set before itself decades ago; and never has that vision been more relevant.

The Lord is our Rock, in Him abide,
A shelter in the time of storm;
A refuge whatever ill betide;
A shelter in the time of storm.

There are storms ahead for our land and world. The thunderheads may be over yonder, but they are blowing our way. Never has the vitality of this church's ministry been more crucial! Never has it been more important for all of us who can, stretching all the way up to the extent that we can, to support this church's witness.

This week, you'll receive information in the mail about the challenge. Next Sunday we will, as an act of worship together, offer ourselves, our pledges and prayers for God's work here in 2009. Ask God to speak to you and all of us how God would have us respond, while we yet have the chance. For no one knows how long the chance will be ours.