

Grassroots Ministry: Creating Circles & Culture of Mercy

Anne Francis (The Congregation): ‘A Circle on the Face of the Deep’

Song of Wisdom (Proverbs 8:27-31)

When he established the heavens, I was there,
 when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
 when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
 so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
 then I was beside him, as an artisan;
and I was daily his delight,
 rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
 and delighting in the human race.

On July 6th, twenty years ago, a circle appeared on the Sligo/Roscommon border. It was a circle drawn on the face of lakes and mountains. Wisdom was present, the divine artisan, delighting in the human community making its foundation there. This circle has been a source of grace and protection for the people of the area over these years. The Mercy community has held and served the locality with creative, prayerful presence expressed in hospitality and opportunities to deepen and nourish the spirit.

I arrived in year 17, as a stranger to the west. First Olive, Margaret and Mae made room for me in their circle of mercy, prayer, spirit and care. They created a space in the Galilee ministry circle, placing me at the centre as I encountered gatherings, comings and goings whirring their gentle spin around me. It was a circle of love; a web of listening and grace. We set four axes of spirituality; creation; pastoral care and ministry support, and small orbits of exploration began to appear. Then COVID arrived and we wondered. While the garden grew and prayer persisted, and the ‘phone became a place of care, there were new circles being formed in the wider web of Wisdom: www.Galilee.ie.

In the Irish or Celtic tradition, we draw prayer circles of divine presence and surrounding. We encircle ourselves or others, often with prayer like that attributed to St Patrick:

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,*

*Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in the mouth of friend and stranger.*

Could our circle expand and make more room, continuing to surround and include? Could we be a circle of ministry despite being hundreds of miles apart? Galilee 'Zoomed' into orbit, not breaking the circle but connecting with many other circles of hope and wisdom.

In this reflection I touch into the circles of Galilee ministry over the last three years. These include scripture sharing, meditation, retreats, pastoral care, climate change awareness, and latterly, online discussions, pastoral supervision and the *Active Hope* cycle.

What circles are you in?
Come in.
The chairs are set out.
Would you like one by the fire?

What circles are you in?
The Word is
Dropping slow
like peace. Like a pebble in the water.

What circles are you in?
What is holding you there?
The ripples are spreading,
embedding life and lives.

What circles are you in?
The silence deepens.
The mystery of
unfailing love surrounds.

What circles are you in?
I have sent a link.
It will make a chain from me, to you,
to us. And the ground that holds us.

Can you hear me now?
I can hear you.
You can hear across the spheres,
and you are seen.

What circles are you in?
Is one delight, and another Wisdom,
carefully drawing her shape?
I have seen you there.

What circles are you in?
I have heard your story,
and you trust me.
We have forgotten that we never met.

What circles are you in?
What time zone?
Sitting with your eyes closed,
are we separate or joined?

What circles are you in?
Do they comfort and restore you?
Do they help you breathe?
Is Christ before you?

So where are we now?
In the garden, in the chapel,
in your kitchen,
in your heart?

We are part
of one another.
There is no beginning
and no end.

With special appreciation and love to Sr Olive Flanagan, Sr Mae McManus, and Sr Margaret O'Brien.