

“Spiraling”

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I’m spiraling.

Sounds bad when I say it that way, right?

But hey! I read the news!

We all see it. In our daily lives, we are trying to “journey up a spiral staircase,” in the words of William Butler Yeats (*The Winding Stair*, 1933). But out in the world it seems that Martin Luther King Jr. was right to tell us that “violence is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.” And meanwhile we all keep repeating our routines of getting up, brushing our teeth, going to work, going to book clubs, feeding ourselves and others, sleeping. Always wondering if we are spiraling up, or down. Wondering if we can change the direction of the spiral.

A certain murder this week is one example. It’s part of a distressingly familiar pattern. While living, a man’s words spewed hatred for those unlike him, and disdain for the suffering of others. The person who murdered him seems to be (from early reports) someone who felt his victim’s rhetoric was not extreme enough. This is hatred eating its own tail, spiraling downwards, cheered on by politicians and journalist desperate to whip up blame against some collective for the actions of one person, an anger threatening to drag the rest down with it.

It's easy to feel we are spiraling down, and yet we keep looking up. We are called to keep looking up. We need to *spiral* up.

Spiraling doesn't have to be a bad thing. We come back to things that draw our attention, that made us happy, to people and places and activities that call us. But we return with new eyes, new experience, so that the return isn't just a repeat. You never step in the same river twice, and all that.

When I started writing this sermon, I honestly didn't think there would be that much written about spirals. Turns out, I was wrong. Sara and I found all sorts of quotes, pictures, ideas, and even kids crafts focused on spirals. The readings in today's service came out of that research (and the truth is, Sara found most of them, so thank you, Sara!).

We often speak about "circles" as the shape of encompassment, of inclusion. We bring people into our circles. We circle around those we love to protect them. Venn diagrams show overlapping ideas through overlapping circles. We talk about things – or people – that don't fit by saying it's a "square peg in a round hole" – with the implication that the thing that doesn't fit is the square peg, not the circle. The round table evokes equality for King Arthur's knights, and open discussion for academics. Pies – both baked and mathematical – are round too.

But spirals more accurately describe the patterns of our universe and our lives than circles do. Consider our "Blue Boat Home," adrift in the dark sea of the universe. [We are constantly spiraling](#), more than any roller-coaster at Knoebels. Our world spins and spirals through the universe, chasing our Sun as it hurtles around the center of the Milky Way, making a rotation about every 250 million years. In the 18 rotations it has made, our sun has aged and changed, while eons of life evolved and died on its third planet. And the Milky Way galaxy itself it also

moving relative to other galaxies in its local cluster. The whole thing is mind boggling, but it is certainly not circular.

On a smaller, and more comprehensible scale, our lives are spirals too. I have long thought of my life and career as a spiral, rather than a straight road to somewhere. Although I've changed anthropological fieldsites a few times – highland Bolivia, Madrid, Ushuaia and Antarctica – I keep spiraling around some key themes and ideas – food, tourism, how people represent themselves and each other and make money off of that. Every so often I go down a rabbit hole (if you want evidence, ask me about zombies sometime) but there seems to be a pattern to the madness, even if I can't quite articulate it, even to myself.

Other parts of my life have spiraled as well. I sang as a kid – when I was a small child, I was in fact singing All. The. Time. The whole neighborhood could hear me, in fact. Apparently when you are a kid that is “cute.” When I was older, I join children's choirs at both my church and my school. But then I stopped after middle school until Dee convinced me to join the choir here – and a couple years later, to join her Barbershop chorus.

I imagine many of us have stories of coming back to something after a time, and finding that we still enjoy it, albeit in a different way than before.

The course of our lives is sometimes described as circular, but really they are spiral. We go through the annual cycle through our whole lives, but it is different each year. We begin as children. We receive care – literally in our infancy we have no hope of surviving on our own. We grow, learning more about caring for ourselves, as we receive gifts of love and food and attention from others. And once we are adults, we in turn offer that care to others.

While we are always getting older, that doesn't mean this is a one-way journey. Throughout our lives, we spiral back to needing care again when we are sick or hurt or tired. But this isn't the same care we received as infants. We need different things, and there are different people around us to offer it.

The care we offer others changes throughout our lives too. Those who have grandchildren might remember how to care for them from their own experiences as parents, but (I'm told) it is a different experience to grandparent than to parent (There's a joke about that, right? Something like, "If I'd known how fun grandchildren were I'd have had them first."). Certainly my own mother gives my kids a lot more dessert than she ever gave my brother and I!

There is an old theory in anthropology called the Theory of the Gift. In 1925, Marcel Mauss argued that gifts – big or small – create obligations between people, and these obligations are actually the stuff of society. Humans are social beings, and we express that by giving things to and doing things for each other. Now, I don't want to give the impression that "gift economies" – the term used for societies that do not use currency – are utopian. Gifts can create hierarchy and political power and inequality, in distinct ways from currency, but just as effectively. But for most of us, gifts are simply expressions of love. Parents do not feed their children because this is a pre-payment on care in their senior years. They feed their children because they love them, and the later care they receive from those children is an expression of that obligation of love.

That love is not a circle. We never circle back to the same point. We are spiraling in our relationships with others. And our love is growing. Like the nautilus's shell, we are constantly creating larger spaces for ourselves, more room to encompass our experiences and connections.

I started by saying we should think about spiraling “up” rather than “down.” That instead of spiraling down a dark stone staircase into a dungeon, we should fly upwards like birds riding thermal winds, reaching into the sky. But in space, there is no “up” or “down,” and so maybe this isn’t the best analogy for us companions of the Blue Boat Home. Instead, let’s spiral “out.” Out into a wider world, out because the previous rotation of the spiral can no longer contain us. Out towards more wisdom, more connections, and more love. Reaching out into the universe.