

## Angela's radical gospel vision: Expanding the circle

How good it is when we are all together! And what a privilege it is to have been asked to share some reflections on this exciting and challenging theme: Angela's radical gospel vision: Expanding the circle.

I would like to begin by focusing on the last part of this topic. The circle.

But before going any farther, I invite you to share in this video.

(The Lion King)

The circle is a fascinating concept. Perhaps spiritual. To speak of circles is to speak of inclusion of equality, of separating into chords, and moving back into the circle.

A circle expands according to the number of points within the circle. The more the points within the circle the greater the expansion.

Let's take a minute to look at the circle in geometric terms.

A **circle** is a shape with all points the same distance from its center.

The distance across a circle through the center is called the **diameter**.

The radius of a circle is the distance from the center of a circle to any point on the circle

A **chord** is a [line segment](#) that joins two points on a curve. In geometry, a chord is often used to describe a line segment joining two endpoints that lie on a circle.

Let's revisit the definition of a circle. A **circle** is the set of points that are equidistant from a special point in the plane. The special point is the center.

Now let's move into some applications of the circle in our lives. In our sophomore literature book there was a poem that I recall very well and have recalled thousands of times in my life. It goes like this

**He/she drew a circle that left me out.**

**Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout**

**But love and I had the wit to win**

**We drew a circle that took her in. (Edwin Markham)**

The reality of human circles is this. We can be, or feel within, or without. But we can also envision bigger circles where we draw the lines and where no one is left out. We are capable of creating circles.

We can be part of many circles. In fact we are. Our mothers and grandmothers were probably parts of sewing circles, quilting circles. My aunt until very recently participated in the quilting circles at Little Sisters of the Poor. The circles were occasions for coming together, for sharing news, sometimes gossip. But they were places of connecting.

Some of our ancestors were parts of drumming circles. In drumming circles there is no leader, or perhaps it is better to say, that everyone is a leader. Someone starts drumming, others

enter the circle of rhythm with their own beat, and eventually one feels that there is only one rhythm, although everyone is thumping to a different beat. The circle creates the uniqueness and the sensation of oneness, even though each drummer has her own beat.

Where do we find circles in our lives?

Some of us are Reiki practitioners. And many who work in energy medicine come together frequently, even weekly, in a circle to support one another's energy. Some come with energy tensed or depleted, but the circle creates, enlivens, nourishes and sustains the practitioners to continue their work or ministry as healers.

Perhaps it was alcoholics anonymous that first created a 12 step program that has later been applied to many addictions or illnesses and has in effect created circles of support, of mutuality, of healing.

In some groups with whom I have worked we talk about sacred circles. It has become a way of identifying what happens when groups of people come together to share their personal stories, their faith experience, their struggles or concerns.

The circle is sacred. A sacred place because of what is shared, what is experienced when people come together, touching that innermost special part of their lives. We are sacred. Our stories are sacred. And the circle is a sacred place.

I along with my companions in Peru and some of our associates had the opportunity recently to participate in the celebration of the 50 years of the Chatham Ursulines in Peru. The celebration was marked by the presence of many women's circles. Fostering

circles of women had become the focus of their ministries over the years. Circles of women as we have come to know them are places of empowerment of women, precisely because the circle is a place of equality, inclusion, where no one is left out and where each woman is an important part of the circle. The circles are places of organization in a true democratic form, so that everyone in the circle is included in the process and development of the circle.

Many of us belong to communities, religious communities, prayer communities, faith communities, service communities, solidarity communities. And basically, a community operates on the same principle. There is something common at the center. It is not any point on the circle that draws the members or participants together, but rather the center.

Our planet earth is often pictured as a circle. It turns on its own axis, and it revolves around the sun, creating day and night, winter and summer. While we know from science that it is not a perfect circle because of the points of tension, we also know that the circular movement is what sustains life on this planet.

In our human circles, one can move in and out, change from one circle to another. Our belonging need not be permanent, although in many cases it will be, precisely because we are drawn to the same center.

We have in the course of our lifetime chosen to enter circles of relationship.

And while some societal circles have fostered exclusion, the Roman Catholic Church being one of them, where rules and qualifications, certain expectations in terms of conduct are presumed, still those of us who have understood circles as

equidistant on a circumference, with a center clearly defined and with any point being equidistant from the center, have stubbornly insisted in inclusion as a basic principle for our circles. I have often thought that the original “company” of St. Ursula was company precisely because Angela had that sense of being relationally “circle”.

Exclusion is about power, of holding to a sense of superiority, of insecurity, where I can only feel accepted if others are not. It is more properly represented by a pyramid, not a circle.

For how long now have we insisted in meeting around circular tables? For how long now have we insisted on coordination of responsibilities and roles rather than a hierarchical, top-down style? We refer to “circular” models.

That insistence comes from that inherent belief and that deeply rooted conviction that we are equal, all of us, all peoples of the earth. All countries, all walks of life, all generations, **all**, no matter the sexual orientation, all of us, no matter how we crossed over, flew in, or were born into a world of inequality.

Now let's return to Angela.

From the out start you need to know that I am not an Angeline scholar. What I know I have learned from those who are: Theresa Ledochowska, Martha Buser, Cabrini Durkin, and Mazzonis.

And I have learned from lots others who have taken their inspiration from Angela and whose lives reflect her charism.

But what I would like to share with you comes from my own biased reflection on who that 16<sup>th</sup> century woman was and what

it is about her life that has drawn so many women and men to her circles.

I would like to share with you some of my perceptions of Angela that I think throw light on Angela's radical gospel vision.

I make no apologies for my unscholarly approach.

First. To speak of Angela's radical gospel vision says to me first of all that Angela knew her own roots, and her rootedness in the land and culture of Italy. She came from a rural area. Her family must have lived that connectedness with the earth. I doubt seriously if Angela spoke the language of the chakras. But I cannot doubt that her root chakra, what connects any of us with that life source that comes from the earth, was fully open to receiving the energy that permitted her to be grounded in spite of the many experiences of uprootedness. Whether in Desanzano, Brescia, Rome or the Holy Land, Angela seems to be a woman who was in touch with herself, with her dreams, with her longings, with her doubts and her wonderings. So similarly, her gospel vision was rooted within her. Certainly not a biblical scholar, Angela did however live a strong connectedness to the "one who loves us all". Her radicalism begins with her own self understanding and her connection with the world around her.

This rootedness in her own story, in her own history is what brought to fruition her life mission. Parker Palmer describes the experience in this way: "I cannot imagine a spiritual pain deeper than dying with the thought that during my sojourn on earth, I had rarely, if ever, shown up as my true self. And I cannot imagine a spiritual comfort deeper than dying with the knowledge that I had spent my brief time on this planet doing the best I could to be present as myself to my family, my friends,

my community, and my world.” So, we can only acknowledge that Angela, then, was deeply aware of who she was, always discovering, of course, but ever conscious of where she came from and ever faithful to the calling forth.

The Gospel itself is radical. That commitment to love the other, whomever the other may be; that commitment to forgive, no matter the wrong done; that commitment to wash feet, welcome the stranger, share your table, make sure that the thousands and more are fed – what could be more radical?

The gospel is at the heart of the universe story, creating and acknowledging connections. It’s radicalism is in the discovery or perhaps better, the acknowledgement that the connectedness among us, the communion of cells, neutrons and protons, the expanding patterns of evolution has as its fundamental source of energy, a love generated into itself, to be multiplied, co-created, and shared.

But as the Gospel is radical so is the Koran, so is the Torah, and so are the other sacred books of other sacred peoples across the earth. To speak of Angela’s gospel vision as radical is to recognize that as such it would have embraced the search for the holy, the urgency to live in the divine, the recognition that all of us who inhabit the earth have the desire and the intent for living in peace and harmony.

**Secondly**, I believe Angela was a dissenter. Often when we hear that word we think of getting out in the streets to protest, or burning draft cards, or something similar. We think of dissenting as confronting, and that certainly is not always the case.

My understanding of a dissenter, however, is one who when faced with what another perceives as true, might say to herself, and to whomever is around her : “I believe something different”. And out of that believing something different makes a decision to turn in another direction. She turns to what she believes to be the truth.

A true dissenter is one who carefully listens to the truth of another. Otherwise how can you dissent, if you do not know the position of the other? If you have not heard the truth as the other sees it? So dissenting implies a real embrace of the other and especially of the other who is different. And from that embrace one can say in honesty, I hear what you are saying, but I disagree. My truth is . . . A dissenter is not afraid to express her truth, her perspective, her opinion to the other. (Example of Michael Crosby, dissenting, and speaking his truth even to the Vatican).

Angela’s life was a dissension from the expectations of a woman of her culture and background. Living alone, defying custom in traveling to foreign lands and even within her own country without the companionship of a spouse, or father.

Angela turned from Rome, from the highest authority in the church, because of her dissension. She turned away from a growing materialism in the church, from a patriarchy that was oppressive, to return to the Brescia that she knew, to the truth to be lived among women in the ruins of war.

As well, she turned from what was the traditional role of a religious woman, that of a monastery, to the much unknown role of being “in company with”.



**Thirdly**, I would like to suggest that Angela was a very political person, (to be distinguished from “politician”). A political person is one who searches out the common good. Angela’s focus was never on herself.

In the society of Angela’s day, in the throes of recovering from a war, Italian society was concerned with individual survival, with picking up the pieces, with mending bodies and mending hearts. War anywhere tears a people apart. In the best of times or worst of times, with filibustering or pressure groups, with lobbying or buying votes or positions on “issues” those in public office or seeking the same tend to care more for their personal issues or what will support and favor their own positions rather than respond to the cries of the multitudes knocking at their doors. Politicians or those in government tend most likely to support what are at their best interests.

It is hard to look at a democracy today and understand that it is “we the people”. Real democracies are hard to come by. It takes work to focus on the common good, to know what that is, to move beyond my small world of problems and needs and truly search for and discover what is for the good of the whole. A purification of the mind and the heart are necessary.

However, Angela’s rootedness in the God who loves us **all**, along with her involvement in the Brescian society, her participation in the Divino Amore society were tools that fostered in Angela an option for the common good.

I do not believe that Angela’s coming to form the “Company” was anything other than a grain of sand that moves toward building ways of addressing what was the common good of her time.

III.

I will be very eager to hear how you feel called to expand the circles. That is why we have come here, is it not? To enrich one another's lives with our own radical gospel vision.

So we ask ourselves the question: what are the challenges for us today as we direct our attention to the expanding of circles?

What are the circles to be created? What are the ones to which we already belong and within whom we choose to expand our visions and horizons?

I find the invitation so exciting. And challenging.

I offer only a few reflections.

First, of course we must take advantage of our commitment to live contemplatively. That's right, insert ourselves into ourselves. Know ourselves, truly and deeply, honoring every cell of our bodies, every thought of our minds, every genius of our imagination. (We don't do that you know.) And that pursuit is a life-time. It never ends. Because our selves are constantly evolving into something new, something changing, something terribly lovely to gaze upon. And within that self-knowledge is knowing our roots: deeply connected to the earth, tending always to the heavens, and expanding our arms' reach out and beyond.

Knowing ourselves as Christian, or Buddhist, or Muslim. As Mexican or Italian or German, eating tortillas or munching banana stew. We know ourselves as coming from the middle class with our own expectations for what is good and just and right, or coming out of poverty and not knowing from where will come the next meal. We know ourselves having benefited from

a fine education, gone to the university, or we know ourselves struggling to get into a university or even to get into primary school.

We enjoy our new kindle or we delight in writing in the sand and reading what others have written there as well. We know ourselves surrounded by computers, Ipads, and Iphones, or we go to bed at night in the darkness of our straw hut because light only comes at the break of day.

From that posture of contemplation we can truly know ourselves. And knowing ourselves enables us to know the other: different. And living contemplatively gives us a different vision from which to know our world. It enables our contact with all that is holy, supremely and deeply holy. We know that the divine is not up there or out there, but in here, deeply within the heart and soul and being of each person.

We must know deeply what it is that holds us together. What is our center? And what it was yesterday, will it be the same today? Of course not. Because we are drawn constantly into that evolutionary change that stretches us, that invites us to grow, that even when we say “enough” it invites us to more.

Secondly, I am wondering if we are not called to be true dissenters. Are we free enough to really listen to the other: the republican or the democrat, the Muslim or the Buddhist, the member of the NRA or the promoter of the Dream Act? And if we are free enough to truly listen to the other, whomever that might be, are we free enough to express an opinion that differs, that dissents, that looks in another direction? Can we sit down together at the same table and dialogue rather than debate?

Can the circles of our hearts open us enough to create those safe places for dialogue?

Can we listen to the woman seeking an abortion without judging? Can we contemplate sexual lifestyles different from our own without feeling threatened or attacked?

What if our Congress engaged in dialogue like the LCWR? What if our senators and representatives sat around round tables, had breakout sessions to discuss, shared opinions rather than debate or filibuster? Can you imagine the difference? What if rather than being right or wrong we came together to look at common concerns and shared opinions and insights?

Two significant events in my lifetime have certainly changed my perspective on my world.

One is the Hubble telescope. And the other is the tearing down of the Berlin wall.

I went with a friend to see the video projection of the Hubble telescope. My little world of thought and imagination was exploded open to an unimaginable realization that this universe that I knew so little about to begin with was the work of billions of years. (And they are not cycles repeating themselves, but rather transformations of which we can choose to be a part, to influence.)

Science has opened to us a totally different understanding of who we are. We are coming to know a universe so dynamic, so ever changing and evolving. We understand ourselves not as one blob of flesh but the miraculous weaving of 60 trillion cells. And while one trillion of those cells will die tonight another trillion

will be born. And we do not have to worry about that. We are neither who we were yesterday nor who we will be tomorrow.

While our institutions have been carved and constructed in cement and our creeds and our doctrines have been imprinted in our heads and in our systems, the universe around us keeps exploding into newness, into something different and ever more alive. Our concrete and cement have encouraged the institutionalization of our beliefs so that we might perpetuate our institutions and maintain them in doctrines and laws and so keep them from growing.

But the circles of the universe are expanding around us. Transformations are happening daily. And we can choose to participate in them consciously, or be blind to their truths and lock ourselves into words or structures that have no meaning for our world today.

In his book, Engaging the Powers, Walter Wink says that when Jesus uses the word “world” as in *My kingdom is not of this world*, or *what does it profit to gain the whole “world”* he is not referring to a here or a there, but to Systems, structures of power that were dominant and oppressive in his time. So the translation would be something like, my kingdom is not of this system, not one of power and exclusion and concrete temples or churches. The kingdom of Jesus, the one announced and the one in which we are invited to participate is the one of justice and peace, of equality and welcoming, of transformation and harmony.

I had read Teilhard de Chardin years ago. I had been inspired by the Omega point and the conversion of energy by love. But seeing the images of the telescope stretched my mind beyond

imagination. What Teilhard projected was in many ways verified by the images of the Hubble telescope. We are such a small part of this universe, but as has been brought to our understanding by Barbara Marx Hubbard and others, we now have a significant role to play in the future conscious evolution of this universe. We are capable of generating energy that takes into account an infinitude of others.

And the second experience that has changed my perspective drastically was the tearing down of the Berlin wall. The wall had symbolically locked dualism into my consciousness perhaps in an unconscious way. There was the realization that we are not north and south, east and west. We are not done justice by a dualistic framework for the solution of problems or the ordering of our societies. The up-down, in-out framework of the world and society has done terrible damage to our relationships with one another.

We must be “we, the people”, **we**, all inclusive, **we** sisters and brothers, Not simply a we who come together and elect who will lead us, but a we who actively participate in discovering, naming, and working toward the common good, knowing that the common good is not just my country, or my world, but my universe, or rather our universe and the universes beyond which I do not yet know. We are not isolated and we must not isolate.

What is our commitment to be “we the people”, and how do we discover the common good? I believe that there are certain assumptions that we need to challenge or question.

Have we not misunderstood the redemption or salvation story? If we believe that Jesus came to save us then there is implied that there was something wrong or evil from which we needed

salvation. Might not it be the case that Jesus came to invite us to participate in this great journey toward peace and justice and inclusion? For if we believe in a God who died to save us, and if violent death can do that, then we have sanctified both violence and death.

Again, as Wink says in his book we have inherited a domination model for our society. And in the domination model we can always expect violence because it builds into itself a hierarchy, a struggle for power and possession. So death is that violent rupture from life. Certainly for those who have lost a loved one, the grief and the mourning for their absence is tragic and painful.

How many times do we hear when someone has died “they are in a better place”? Place? Where? Is there a where?

Maybe they are still here. Not there or away. However their transformation happened their presence might be more real than when they were sitting across from us at the table.

I think that is what Jesus was telling us and it is what Angela meant when she said I will be more present to you than when I was physically present. Maybe they should be invited into the circle.

So if god is not out there but in here. If god is in the 60 trillion cells of my body and of yours and of the Muslim and the Jew and the atheist and non-believers, then our understanding of the universe is that what connects us (think of the circle) is a divine presence. We are not separate but connected. The expansion of circles is already happening and we are invited to be a conscious part of that. And here “conscious” is the key word.

We do not “go” to God. God is already here, within us. Our belief in the indwelling helps us here. In Iraq and Afghanistan, in North Korea and China, the divine is the energy that holds us together. Geographic borders are inventions of our need to divide and conquer.

I have for a long time believed that private property was our greatest sinful invention. It is what has made us desirous of more. It is what has promoted and instilled in our hearts a consumerist drive, so that if we do not buy we will be without.

When I first went to Peru one of the novelties that I experienced was that we went to the market every day. We only bought what we were going to need or prepare for that day. We had no big cupboards or storerooms.

Our struggle now to move from a consumerist to a simpler lifestyle is a challenge and for most of us it is difficult. We buy and read books, go to lectures to help us understand how we can live more simply because living in abundance seems to be in our genes and it is what drives us to a more, and bigger, and faster.

We are called to search for the common good. (Video)

And we must be convinced that it is not what we thought it was. For example, locking people up is not the answer for security or protection. No one is safer just because there are more prisons, bigger jails.

Remember, “We the people in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice and insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, ...”

I have learned that there are conversation groups all across the country promoted by persons in search of a true democracy,



who are exploring together concepts around compassion, understanding. So while the first step in this process might be to enter into that contemplative place where we begin to see (hear, observe,) differently,

And if the second step is holy dissension and acting on what we believe, perhaps the third step is placing in communion our thoughts, our hopes and dreams, our longings. It is precisely what we came here to do: to share the stirrings of our contemplative spaces so that in communion, our circles might truly expand.

The very fact of your presence here says that the circle is already expanding. So we must find ways (which I believe we will do in the next few days) to enhance the synergy among us so that beyond July 7 we will continue the conversations and continue the expanding of circles.

And what we place in communion is in other words our search for the common good. I know that I can count on the energy of this room. I know that I can count on the spirit of Angela, to hold us together so that we can in fact go out and beyond and let our energies explode into something incredibly new. Not a new work, or new ministry (as we like to call it) but a new awareness that we are in fact participating in the evolutionary consciousness of a new world coming to be.

Can you not feel it? Can you not see it?

I come to a close now, and I remind us:

He drew a circle that left me out, heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win, we drew a circle that took them in.