



May 15, 2022 - The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Extend the Sphere of Love

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Oh Lord, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

For many years, I taught United States History, and so for us history nerds, it may not be surprising that there was something about the Lesson from Acts this morning that reminded me of Federalist Papers #10. Stay with me here.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles is the earliest systematic account that we have of the explosive growth of the Early Church in the years following Jesus' death and resurrection. It is written by the same hand which wrote the Gospel according to Luke, late in the first century. The Holy Spirit moves like wildfire through the Church in this account, and it shows the struggles, but especially the successes, of the Early Church.

The Federalist Papers were propaganda written in 1787 and 1788 by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay to promote the ratification of the new Federal Constitution. The Articles of Confederation, hastily thrown together during the Revolutionary War, had proven insufficient for governing the new nation.

The Constitution promised a much stronger central government, along with checks and balances among the three branches to prevent the concentration of power. We note the tug of war among those branches today, particularly in recent days as seen in the struggle over reproductive rights among the judicial, legislative, and executive branches.

In any case, Federalist #10 was meant to address the fear of factions and the tyranny of the majority. As the new, growing nation struggled to govern itself, the accepted wisdom was that increased population and land would lead to the tyranny of the mob. The novel idea was that the larger the country, the greater the diversity of interests, the more difficult it would be for any one interest to gain control of the majority. ***Extend the sphere!*** Madison proclaimed in Federalist #10!

Extending the sphere is what the Holy Spirit is directing the Church to do in Acts. Extending the sphere is what Peter is arguing for. Extend the sphere of God's life-giving love and activity to the whole world. Extend the Sphere! The Acts of the Apostle is a clarion call to spread the love of God as revealed in Jesus throughout the whole world.

We live in a time of toxic otherizing. We see it in our political and civic culture. Just yesterday, what seems clearly to be a racially motivated mass shooting in Buffalo, was for sure the act of a deranged individual with easy access to military gear, but also points to the deep-seated fear of difference, of the *other*, that is a more powerful current in our nation than many of us care to admit.

Christians are called to be non-toxic, to be antidotes to hatred and malice, to chip away at the tribal instinct to circle the wagons and keep people out, by extending the sphere of love.



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And see how Peter shows this to us. Up to this point, Peter had understood Jesus to be a revelation just for other Jews—"circumcised believers" is how the text refers to them, the circumcision of male Jews being a chief marker for membership in the unbreakable covenant relationship that the Jewish people have with God. Jesus was the Messiah pointed to in the Hebrew Scriptures; but that Messiah was *thought* to be for Jews only, and *not* for Gentiles (non-Jews)... this was how Peter had been trained to believe.

But Peter's vision rocks his assumptions to the core.

Against his previous prejudices, Peter now declares, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane," and, even better, "The Spirit told me to go with them, and *not to make a distinction between them and us.*"

Them and us. How often we do make distinctions between *them* and *us*.

Peter and other early Jewish believers came to understand that the saving love of God as revealed in Jesus was for the whole world. The Church has not always been good at this. In this country, just for starters, we can point to Christian justification for the subjugation of native peoples and enslaved Africans and women, of gay and lesbian people, for example. But, we have been learning to *extend the sphere of love* in these same areas, and more, in our relationship to other religious traditions, and in our relationship to this fragile earth, our island home.

This morning's Gospel passage from John depicts Jesus in the midst of his final time with his disciples. He has already washed their feet. He is preparing them for his departure and giving them instructions for how to live when he is physically gone. Jesus tells his disciples: I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

Now, in one sense, there is nothing new about this commandment. God's covenant love—"hesed" in Hebrew—for the Jewish people is a central theme in the Hebrew Bible.

But what *was new* about it, is that a new community comes forth from this commandment to love. A new community that follows Jesus, that understands the way of Jesus to be the way of love. Extend the sphere of love.

Yesterday at St. Stephen's, Cohasset, eight of our young people were confirmed by the Rt. Rev. Gayle Harris, our Suffragan, or assistant Bishop. I have presented teens to her for confirmation many times, and her encounter with our young people at that moment never fails to move me.



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As a black woman, she represents the extension of the sphere of love by the Church, not without years of considerable conflict and resistance to the role of women and people of color in the Church, for sure, but nonetheless, her presence embodies the fruit of the extension of Christ's love to bridge the chasm between "us" and "them."

And in that one-on-one encounter (which included, in the words of one kid, the fact that she "smells so good!" - the sweet aroma of her spiritual power—in my words) as she affectionately banter with them about the meaning of their names, as she lays her beautiful and strong hands on their heads, as she adores them with her eyes, she reminds them of God's deep abiding love for them. And she exhorts them take that love out into a world in desperate need of it.

So let us extend the sphere of love. In our hearts and in our homes. On our highways and byways. In private conversation and in public utterance. In our workplaces and on vacation. In our texts and in our tweets. In our thoughts, in our words, in our deeds. Extend the sphere. **Amen.**