

# SERMON | FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 11:1-18 | Revelation 21:1-6 | John 13:31-35 | Barnabas Pusunur | St. Paul & the Redeemer | May 15, 2022

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I believe there is great value in a team having a mission or a vision statement. It helps to guide all the different parts towards one common objective. While having a vision statement is great, it is always much harder to know how to precisely implement that vision. If there was one vision statement that Jesus wanted his disciples to have, it was: Love one another.

Having supper with his disciples for the very last time, Jesus washes his disciples' feet and then tells them to love another as he has loved them. He goes on to say, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

But what does loving one another mean? On the face of it, it sounds simple. Be kind and good to each other. Jesus had already shown that this love often involved humility and service to others. While the disciples had some idea about how to love, the whom to love was not as easy. The book of Acts of the Apostles shows that even as the church was growing it was struggling as it tried to understand the full implications of the command to love.

Peter had just completed a mission of preaching the good news of love and had performed healing miracles. However, there was something about this mission that Christians in Jerusalem were very disturbed about. There was something they did not like. And when Peter came to Jerusalem, they criticized him.

Now Christianity had started off as a renewal movement within Judaism. Jesus and all the disciples were very similar in terms of their religious and ethnic background. To love in that community meant to love

someone who was very similar to you. Of course, there were differences in social status and economic conditions, however, they knew they were the same people group.

But the book of Acts tells a story that the church was constantly expanding the definition of who was to be part of this loving one another. The first broadening of the church was on Pentecost (which is coming in three weeks). Until now this Christians likely belonged more or less to the same geographical region and spoke one language. But on Pentecost, there were Jews from different parts of the world who had different native languages. Many of these Jews chose the way of Jesus. Suddenly the original disciples realized that Christian love had to be expanded and stretched. Christianity was not just about a Judean Jews but about Jews everywhere.

The book of Acts recounts that there was conflict between the Hebrew Jews and the Greek Jews but the church had to learn how to resolve it. They did this by appointing some Greek Jews as leaders. The disciples had succeeded in stretching love.

But soon, one of the disciples saw that the people called Samaritans, who had ancient animosity with Jews, were also interested in this message of Jesus. Does Christianity now need to include Samaritans as well? The leaders were consulted, and they agreed that Christian love needed to be stretched further to include Samaritans.

An Ethiopian court official, who was a Eunuch, had come to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way back, he

met one of the disciples and was impressed by the message of Jesus. He was baptized and thus the Christian love was stretched further.

The love had to be stretched to include even former persecutors like Paul. Many Christians were extremely skeptical when they heard about Paul's conversion and his desire to join the church. They were afraid of him because of all he had done before. But Christian love had to be stretched.

This Jewish Christian group had expanded quite a bit. But one of the most significant stretching of Christian love in the social context of the first century Israel, was when a Roman army official named Cornelius, who was not a Jew, became interested in the message of Jesus. It is at this time that Peter has a vision. It's a powerful vision with powerful implications.

Peter sees something like a sheet being lowered with animals in it. These animals were considered religiously unclean and were forbidden for Jews to consume. It was not simply a preference but was a command given by God and down through the ages had become an identity marker for a Jew. In the vision God tells Peter to consume these animals. And Peter shouts back, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' To consume these animals was to lose what it means to be a Jew. It was to lose one's self-understanding. It was to cross to the other side. To become a non-Jew in some ways. But God tells Peter "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Peter resists three times before understanding what God was asking him to do.

While Peter is seeing this vision people from Cornelius household come to him and invite him to visit their house and share this message of Jesus with them. The

spirit tells Peter to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and the Jews. Eventually Cornelius and his household all become part of this people called Christians. The Christian love had stretched.

The implications of this experience were hard for the other Christian leaders at that time, and it caused a lot of anguish and conflict in the church. They called Peter and criticized him for forgetting what it means to be a Christian- for them it meant to be a Jewish follower of a Jewish messiah Jesus. But Jesus' love another- was more profound than any of them understood. They had to transgress the most important social & religious marker to stretch this love further.

It seems to me that at every age, we like the disciple will always be challenged to stretch this love. Stretching this injunction to love another to the other, to those who are very unlike us. This other may mean different things for you and me. Who is it that we need to stretch this love to? Who is it that we consider the other, the one who is different from us, whether an individual or a certain group? Different either politically, economically, geographically or distinct in any other way. Does it need to stretch to non-human creation as well? Does our love stretch to cover as?

I believe just like the early church, this journey of stretching our love is an ongoing process. God's vision is far greater than ours. In the ultimate vision as mentioned in Revelation, God says that he will make all things new, God will make a home among us and dwell with us. All pain and sorrow will be wiped away. As we head towards that vision, let us keep stretching our love. Let's keep becoming more and more open to the ultimate vision of God, who is love. Amen.