

“Will We Expand with God’s Love?”

Friends, longtime and new, we are gathered on this beautiful spring morning to worship God, which is fathomless and expansive Love. We acknowledge that this land we now love as People’s Park has been loved by the Wahpekute tribe of the Dakota people and others for millennia before us. As we enter into a time of wondering if we will expand with God’s love, please pray with me.

God of all, you are the source who empowers us as individuals and as a community of faith. Energize us today as we consider how we might individually and collectively expand with your love. As you move within and among us this morning, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

If an opposite of love is fear, I think an opposite of love-fueled expansion might be fear-fueled indifference. I notice that we often practice a toxic level of fear-emboldened indifference when we could instead encounter our experiences with love-emboldened expansion. I’ll flesh out what I mean by love-emboldened expansion and fear-emboldened indifference. Imagine with me that you are arriving to meet up with a friend at a favorite walking trail. Just prior to your arrival, you were on a tense phone call with a family member or a coworker. Reading the stress in your eyes and in your posture, your friend asks what’s wrong (expansion). You sigh, begin to tell them that you were on the phone with so-and-so (expansion), but then stop short by saying, ‘but it’s not a big deal’ and (dismissed) the love-fueled possibility of sharing in compassion in that moment is killed by an enculturated compulsion to dismiss hard feelings, to not allow them space, to practice indifference toward them.

‘It’s not a big deal?’ We may not want something we’re experiencing to be a big deal and we may not feel brave enough to share honestly about it, but it is still significant. Another common toxic, expansion-denying phrase is ‘It doesn’t matter.’ It does matter to the other person if they are wondering aloud about an experience that seems to be affecting you. The response that perhaps epitomizes the subjugation of love-based expansion to fear-based contraction into indifference is this one: ‘It’s nothing.’ Friends, all of our experiences and feelings have significance. Let’s unlearn our enculturated ways of indifferently dismissing our experiences – ways that have trained us to take up less and less space in our own lives.

Let’s turn now to our scripture lesson for today to notice how Peter responds to his experiences. We heard Sharri read this: *“The apostles and the community in Judea heard that Gentiles, too, had accepted the word of God. As a result, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, some of the Jewish believers took issue with him. ‘So you have been visiting the Gentiles and eating with them, have you’ they said.”*

What if Peter had deferred to the anxiety of his companions around the apparent expansion of their faith community and said to them, ‘it’s not a big deal. My visit to that city was nothing.’ The first century CE was ripe with opportunities to dismiss the message Jesus had embodied. Indifference would have been much safer than love. For us, contracting indifference often feels safer than expanding love in the twenty-first century as well.

Threats on Peter’s life must have tempted him to downplay, hide, or even deny his work. But thank God for Peter’s courage and honesty. We heard, *“Peter then explained the whole affair to them step by step from the beginning.”* I wonder, who are the influential contemporary truth-sharers in your life? Have you begun to follow their lead – to be their disciples?

Peter goes on to tell his companions (the ones who were questioning his choice to share Jesus' message with Gentiles) about his experience with Cornelius, a Roman centurion – a person with status within the Roman power structure. Both Peter and Cornelius model expansion in significant ways as they prepare for and encounter the other. Peter describes a transformative vision in this way:

“One day when I was in the town of Joppa, I fell into a trance while at prayer and had a vision of something like a big sheet let down from heaven by its four corners. This sheet came quite close to me. I watched it intently and saw all sorts of animals and wild beasts—everything possible that could walk, crawl or fly. Then I heard a voice that said to me, ‘Now, Peter, make your sacrifice and eat.’ I replied, ‘I can’t eat my God. Nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth!’ And a second time the voice spoke from heaven, ‘Don’t call profane what God has made clean.’ This happened three times, then the sheet and what was in it was drawn up to heaven again.” Peter interpreted his vision as the Spirit of God urging him to expand beyond the clarity of his own religious practices. Peter felt the Spirit urging him to see people outside of his familiar circle of family and friends as people who also bear the image of God, albeit in ways unfamiliar to Peter.

This scripture text is one of many that has been weaponized by Christians against Jews. I doubt Peter completely disregarded his faithful adherence to Jewish purity laws governing what he ate based on that vision. His rabbi Jesus would have faithfully followed those same purity laws. I imagine he took a deep breath (expansion) and asked himself how he might listen deeply to what the vision stirred in him about welcoming who and what might be strange or new for him.

And Cornelius expanded himself by continuing to engage with Peter and other followers of Jesus as the Spirit led him. This was not Cornelius' first encounter with Peter. He had been energized by the message they embodied and sought to learn more. Peter continued telling the story of what happened that day:

“Just at that moment, three couriers stopped outside the house where we were staying; they had been sent from Caesarea to fetch me, and the Spirit told me to have no hesitation about returning with them. These six believers came with me as well, and we entered Cornelius' house. He told us he had seen an angel standing in the house who had said, ‘Send messengers to Joppa and bring back Simon, known as Peter; he has a message for you that will save you and your entire household.’”

Friends, who might be carrying a life-giving, life supporting message to you at this very moment? Will you be like Cornelius, opening yourself to welcome that person's message to you?

I encourage us to hold and carry these questions with us in our individual private and public lives in the coming week. And I encourage us to hold and carry these questions with us into our congregational meeting later today, when we look at all the strength we have and all the vibrancy we continue to seek after.

When you encounter someone or something new, will you expansively join Peter in asking, *“And who am I to stand in God's way?”* When we feel forces pulling us to contract, dismiss and become indifferent, may we instead expand with God's love. Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
May 15, 2022 (5th Sunday of Easter, Special Congregational Meeting)
Acts 11: 1-18