

Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 9, 2021  
 “The Proper Perspective” (Acts 10:44-48 and John 13:9-17)

A couple whose daughter had gone off to college  
 received this letter:

*Dear Mom and Dad:*

*It has now been three months since I left for college. I'm sorry have haven't written before, but I will bring you up to date now. I'd just request that you sit down before reading any further.*

*I am getting along pretty well now. The skull fracture and the concussion I got when I jumped out of the window of my dormitory when it caught fire are pretty well healed now. I only spent two weeks in the hospital and now I can see almost normally and only get three headaches a day.*

*Fortunately the fire in the dormitory and my jump were witnessed by an attendant at the gas station near the dorm and he was the one who called the Fire Department and the ambulance. He also visited me at the hospital. He is really sweet and you will like him. We have fallen deeply in love and so we eloped shortly after I got out of the hospital. We are now living in his apartment. It's really a basement room, but it is kind of cute. I am fixing up a corner of the one room apartment as a nursery. Yes, Mother and Dad, I am expecting. I know how much you are looking forward to being grandparents and I know you will welcome the baby and give it the same love and devotion you gave me.*

*Now that I have brought you up to date, I want to tell you that there was no dormitory fire, I did not have a concussion or skull fracture, I was not in the hospital, I am not married, I am not pregnant. However, I am getting a "D" in History and an "F" in Science, and I wanted you to see these marks in the proper perspective.*

The proper perspective. The few verses from our first reading today provide us with an ending to a much longer story, a story that gives the Apostle Peter and the early Christian Church a new perspective on an old way of thinking.

Christianity in the first century was known as “The Way,” and was considered to be an offshoot or subsidiary of Judaism. After all, people of “The Way” were following Jesus, who was the Jewish Messiah and the one who was executed for the crime of being the King of the Jews.

When these early Christians converted from Judaism, they brought to Christianity many of their Jewish practices and beliefs. One of the predominant beliefs they brought was that Gentiles were unclean. They ate unclean foods, dressed in ways that were not Biblical, and lived in ways that did not follow the laws of Moses. Furthermore, Gentiles did not bear the covenant mark of circumcision. Essentially, these early Christians believed the only way Gentile converts could become members of “The Way” was to first convert to Judaism, meaning that they had to undergo circumcision and practice strict observance to Mosaic law. From their perspective, a Gentile could not be a follower of Jesus – nor should he want to be a follower – without becoming a Jew first.

I know this is difficult for us to understand. Most Christians today are ethnically Gentiles who view Judaism as an entirely different religion. But that was not the case in the first century. In that first reading from Acts, Peter finds himself standing in a room full of Gentiles. How he got there is somewhat puzzling to him.

Two days before, Peter was on his roof praying. He had a vision of a cloth filled with unclean animals that came down and laid before him. He heard a voice say, *Rise up and eat*. Being a good Jew, Peter replied, *Never! They are not clean*. But the voice said, *What God has made clean, you must not profane*. That's when some men came to Peter's house. They had been sent by a Roman soldier, a centurion, whose name was Cornelius. We are told that Cornelius was a God-fearing man who studied the Scriptures and regularly gave alms to the poor. The day before, an angel had appeared to Cornelius telling him to send for Peter. When Peter and some other believers arrived at Cornelius' home, he expected one man to be waiting on him. Instead, there was a room full of Cornelius' friends and family.

I can imagine that Peter was uncomfortable being in this room filled with Gentiles. He had been taught from the time he was a child that God's people did not associate with pagans. Yet he remembered the vision God had shown him and how he should be careful about what he calls unclean. Perhaps that vision was about more than food. Perhaps it extended to people, as well. Peter was gaining a different perspective: that the good news of Christ was for everyone. And from God's viewpoint, this was the proper perspective. So Peter began to tell them that God shows no partiality and that Jesus – the Lord of all – died and rose again to save God's chosen ones.

While Peter was speaking, Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles – the same Spirit that had come to the disciples at Pentecost – and they began speaking in tongues, the language of the Spirit. The Jews who had accompanied Peter were astounded that God's Holy Spirit was living in Gentiles. Then Peter said, *If the Spirit dwells in them as it does in us, who is to say these Gentiles should not be baptized?* In other words, if Jesus was Lord of all, there was no reason these Gentiles should not be welcomed into the Christian community. Nor should they have to become Jews first. So Peter ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

These were people no one had dreamed could become believers. But God had approved them by anointing them with his Holy Spirit. Now, all of a sudden, the church – which had been strictly Jewish converts – had a much broader reach than it had ever dreamed. Even Roman soldiers, like the very ones who crucified Jesus, could become his followers. God had drastically changed their standpoint. He had broadened their horizons. They now saw things and people in a whole new way. They saw things from the proper perspective.

In this narrative, Luke creates a scene in which old divisions are broken down. Those who had been at odds with each other – namely Jews and Gentiles – were now brought together in one common community of faith. This young Christian community began to reach out to people beyond its immediate scope and to exercise Jesus' ministry of inclusivity. Just as Jesus in his earthly life reached out to the many outcasts of his day – to lepers, the poor, tax collectors, prostitutes, and even women – the message of the gospel was now applied by the first Christians

in how they dealt with the varied peoples they encountered as they sought to spread Christ's message to the world.

Peter and the early Christians now had the proper perspective. And I'm sure Peter remembered things from the time he spent with Jesus that helped support and shape this new perspective. Our gospel reading for today is an example. In the upper room with his disciples, talking about the fruits of the Christians life, Jesus put a special emphasis on love. He said, *Abide in my love, and love one another as I have loved you*. But what is this love?

In the NT, there are three different Greek words that can be translated as "love." One is *eros* from which we get the word *erotic*. Eros love is a self-serving love. Eros means that I love you because you give me something in return. Then there is *phileo*. This is brother and sisterly love. The City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia, gets its name from this word. This love is loving those who are similar to us. Finally, there is *agape*. This is unconditional love. It is love given for the sake of the other. And *agape* love is what Jesus uses here.

Jesus basically defines *agape* when he says *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends*. And the context of these words is important. Jesus had just washed his disciples' feet and served them communion. The shadow of the cross was looming near. So the *one* Jesus was talking about is himself. He was alluding to the death he was about to suffer; to the giving or the laying down of his own life for us.

This is love, my friends. This is *agape* love - loving for the sake of another. Jesus' death was a living example of the kind of love we should live. When Jesus said, *love one another*, he meant that we should sacrifice for one another. Now I know that very few of us will ever be placed in a situation where we actually have to give our life for someone else. Even so, we can still love with unconditional *agape* love. We do this by making little sacrifices. We do this by putting the needs of others ahead of our own. And when we do this, we are bearing the good fruit that our Lord commanded us to bear.

What this Acts passage tells me is that we need to see others from the proper perspective. We need to see them from Christ's perspective. When we see a homeless person asking for food, perhaps we see a drunken bum who can't hold down a job and is getting what he deserves. But God sees one of his children – one for whom he loved deeply enough to die – who is down on his luck and needs someone in his life who cares.

God calls us to change our perspective. And if we'll allow it, God will lift us above our limited, narrow perspectives and help us to see things through his eyes. Isn't that what the resurrection did? God enabled us to see life where all we saw was death, to see hope where all we knew was hopelessness, and to see grace where all we experienced was judgment.

The Holy Spirit was at work giving Peter and the early church a new perspective. They came to understand that God's people are not all alike, nor do they have to jump through hoops to be followers of Christ. As Lord of all who died for all, that all might be saved, Christ bestows his love and grace and forgiveness on all. And he calls us to have the proper perspective in order that

we might follow his example. Thanks be to God who loves us more than we could ever deserve or desire.