

**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter Year C**  
**The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson**

As I step onto the small wooden bridge, over the often fast-moving stream, and plant my feet upon the fine white sand by Fuller Lake, I often feel transported into another country, time, or thin place. I offer myself the gift of pausing for a moment to soak in the beauty of the lake before me. At times the lake reflects a hue of dark hunter green; very often a warm breeze lifts off the water and comes wafting towards me; and generally the surface of the lake is completely still. It's a fairly large body of water to be remain still, without a ripple caused by a moving current, or swimming fish, or birds piercing the surface with their bodies. One day, fairly recently, a Canada goose was swimming alone, and the ripples caused by his paddling feet were making a pattern on the surface of the water which seemed to radiate over the entire pond, until the ripple collided on all the shores of the lake.

This image brought a memory back to me of times I shared with my sister: we would spend hours by the lake just down the hill from our home, skipping stones, delighting in the circles they would make, and watching that same motion which caused a series of ever-enlarging circles to sweep it's way across the pond.

Although I am fairly certain I didn't think about this at the time in my childhood, we can understand the visual of a rock breaking the surface of water and the ensuing enlarging rings, which grow to embrace more and more of the pond, to represent the circles of people in our lives with whom we are in relationship, with the tiniest circle where the rock broke through the surface of the water, being our closest family members, then the next circle perhaps our closest friends whom we could call in the middle of the night if we needed them, then, perhaps, the next circle the people we work closely with, then the people we come in regular contact with, then, perhaps, the most outer rings to include the people we watch on the news.

We can also take this image of the ever-enlarging rings and allow it to portray the growth of the "Jesus movement". We can imagine a still pond and the rock, which God has plopped into this sea of humanity, as being God incarnate, Jesus. The tiniest circle could be the disciples, the people whose lives had been completely transformed by their interaction with Jesus; the next circle could be the group of people who were healed by Jesus, the next circle could be the people who followed him around from town to town, and perhaps the next one, the people who had heard of, but hadn't yet met Jesus. The outer most rings do not yet touch all the shorelines, for not everyone is following Jesus.

In the book of Acts, which we are reading throughout the season of Easter, we hear of the ever-enlarging circles of the people who first claimed Jesus as the messiah and then later as the "Lord of all" through the account offered by the author Luke. The passage we read today, when the apostle Peter is explaining and

defending his evangelism to the gentiles (the non-Jewish people of the day) is a key missional event, one that dramatically shifted the audience of Peter's preaching from Jews to Gentiles and contributed largely to the growth of the Christian church.

We can imagine the early church, the tiniest circle in the pond, as part of the Jewish tradition. Christianity had its origin as a Jewish set. Those who believed Jesus was the messiah were Hebrew-speaking Jews who mainly lived in Jerusalem. The disciples who became apostles would have been in this group.

Then Pentecost happened, and a much wider ring appeared as thousands of people were converted that day. Here Peter preaches to Jewish people using Jewish scriptures, however, the nationalities and languages represented give us a clue as to what comes next. We now know that the church was poised to explode into the non-Jewish world. It was clear that God would break down whatever boundaries God's people had set around race, nationality or culture.

The next ever-enlarging ring would be to Greek-speaking Jews, and there was a clash between the Greek and Hebrew speaking Jews, but the early church, when it found itself already dividing, was able to handle that conflict really well and unity prevailed.

So we begin with the Hebrew-speaking Jews from the Middle East coming to Christ, and forming the innermost circle. Then we have the Greek-speaking Jews from southern Europe and North Africa coming to Christ, and forming the next slightly larger circle.

Then the next largest circle appeared when Saul was converted by his experience with Jesus on his road to Damascus, and Paul understood his call to be a missionary to the gentiles. The focus of the church continued to be to reach out to and convert more Jews to Christ AND it was also to reach and convert gentiles to Christ.

A key player in the mission work to the gentiles is Peter. In our passage this morning the news of his eating with gentiles precedes his arrival in Jerusalem and he finds himself before the council trying to explain why he would eat at Cornelius' house, which meant he had violated the Jewish dietary laws, which were strictly held by observant Jews. When the Jewish authorities heard that Peter had baptized people who were not first Jewish, this ushered in the next major clash in the early church regarding who can be included.

For with this action of eating food which Peter had considered profane, prior to his vision, he was claiming that God can bring people to Jesus, without first bringing them to the Jewish faith. Peter, in essence was saying that something as foundational as their traditions and the stories in the Hebrew Bible could be set aside and was no longer that which defined or shaped their beliefs.

The emotional and wrenching question before the early church was: Does including the new or different mean that we are letting go of the values that have always defined us? An argument against sanctioning the movement toward inclusion of all people could have been that this action is in direct opposition to what the scriptures and their tradition tells them, that the beliefs they grew up with are at the core of who they are as faithful believers of God and it couldn't possibly be that they are invited to change everything to embrace this new thing God was doing. They could have chosen to limit God's action to what was occurring only within their own tradition, not outside it, and to not comprehend a wider circle of love, the ripples of which could reach every shore. There does seem to be something inherently complicated about inclusion. It can be easier to be insular rather than permeable; to be closed rather than open; static, rather than dynamic, yet this was where God was moving the Jewish Christians, into a brand new understanding of Jesus for all of God's people, not just the Jews.

The interior spiritual work that the council members walked through in a heartbeat, after hearing of Peter's vision and his conviction that God had acted, was to allow the values that defined them, such as love and compassion, to compel them to become more inclusive and open. It appears as though they expressed their faithfulness to God by their willingness to travel beyond their comfort of having fixed lines in the sand, and to completely and radically re-orient themselves to stretch their circles of inclusion ever wider, willingly bearing the costs of giving up previously held beliefs, and to make the boundaries of the ever-enlarging circles permeable.

The questions of "Does including the new and different mean that we are letting go of the values that have always defined us? Or do the values that define us compel us to be more inclusive and open?" represent a major turning point in the story of the early church. It is also the crux of much of the turmoil in the contemporary church, as it takes little imagination to see how this same question applies to many of the controversies the Episcopal Church has walked through recently. The Episcopal Church continues Peter's work by continually making the circles ever wider.

Peter confronted the council's questioning with a question, "Who was I to hinder God?" His response speaks to the fact that he clearly understood that God is acting in the world and Peter's work, and our work, is to catch up to the ever-enlarging circles of love. It must have been a shocking thought to the Hebrew-speaking believers that God is acting outside their circle and that God's grace is available to all and they had to radically shift their thinking to catch up with God's movement through the Holy Spirit in the world, to believe that God can call people into relationship without them first becoming Hebrew speaking Jews. It can be a shock to us today that God is acting outside the circle of our set of beliefs, outside the walls of our church, outside the boundaries we mark with certain people, and

that God is drawing more and more circles beyond us, that we have to catch up to in our hearts. It can be a challenge for us to say from our hearts, "Who am I to hinder God?" when God's love precedes us.

Or, we can be totally energized and motivated by a God who is out there beyond us, inviting us to find new expressions of our deepest values: love and compassion for all. There is energy, excitement and joy when we look for the movement of the Holy Spirit around us and we accept the invitation to join in the Jesus movement. It's marvelous to imagine that God's bigger plan is being enacted and it is beyond our imagination is drawing all of humankind and creation into unity of which we are a part. There are costs to this sometimes: we may need to look with different eyes at our neighbors, we may need to address our prejudices openly, and we may need to heal our relationships with others or heal our own deepest wounds. This can be hard work and it takes courage at times to embrace a new dimension of God and be challenged by God's expansive love, but this too is part of God's plan, and this too is what the early church teaches us. Our church tradition is rooted in allowing us to be radically transformed in our beliefs and understanding of God.

I invite you to imagine planting your feet on the white sand on the beach by Fuller Lake with me. And let's imagine Jesus, the rock of our salvation, having been dropped into the center of the lake and we see the ripples form, in ever-enlarging circles of love and inclusion. And let's imagine the ripples ultimately lap up against the shoreline, in every possible place, so that no person or no thing remains untouched by the love of Jesus. Into which circle would you place yourself? Are you near the center, where God has created circles of inclusion beyond your understanding and you are feeling a need to catch up or you are feeling you are drowning in your confusion? Or are you near the edge, where you can imagine Jesus' love lapping up against all people. The good news is Jesus meets us wherever we are, whichever circle we find ourselves in, and yet, we are prompted to ask the question Peter did, "Who am I to hinder God?" in Jesus' redemptive work in our world.

Amen.