

“Witnesses to a Wider Circle”
A, Seventh Sunday of Easter; 10:00 am
Acts 1:6-14; May 28, 2017
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

I. GAWKING OR GRADUATING?

Ascension Sunday. The day we celebrate Jesus being elevated up in the clouds, returning to the Father. Getting out of the way, in a sense, so the Holy Spirit—the Advocate—the Counselor—can come.

It’s a funny little story in Acts, really. It launches Luke’s story of the spread of the early church. What’s funny is not the momentousness of this event—symbolic or literal—either way its understood. But the actions of the disciples.

Picture this scene. Picture *yourselves* in this scene. It’s eerily reminiscent of the Easter morning scene—because—who else, but two men in white robes show up to give them a talking to! And, “a cloud takes him out of their sight” and they, like the disciples on Easter morning, are “gazing up toward Heaven; looking in the wrong direction”—chided for “looking for the living among the dead!”

Today, on this mountain, the disciples—named, one by one—are in a kind of “freeze frame.” They are standing there, watching Jesus grow more and more distant, totally unsure of where they are to go from here.

Perplexed, even despairing of what happens next in life. Are they mesmerized or paralyzed? We’re not really sure!

Leading up to this moment, they’ve asked Jesus—again! “Is this the moment, Master?! Is it NOW, Lord?! Now are you *finally* gonna do it? Gonna kick some butt? Finally knock some heads together and overthrow those in power that are making our lives so miserable?”

And dear, patient Jesus, replies as he often does, with calm, but firm, wisdom: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set.....”

II. YOUR CHARGE AND YOUR GIFT

BUT.

“But! You **will** be part of this! you **won’t** be left out. *Nor* will you be let off the hook! The Holy Spirit will come upon you soon—come into your hearts and into your midst—and you’ll have **The Power!**”

“But. It’s a different *kind* of power than you keep harping for—power with, not power over. Not “kick butt power”—the power to overthrow the ones that persecute you or hold you down, but power to *witness* to a *different* way. A *better* way of working *together* on this planet for the good of all!”

“You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. That’s a higher road. A much, much more excellent way. You will learn that God’s not playing that same old power game anymore—and never was! That way of some lording it over others. Of “**might making right.**”

And, after they broke out of the freeze frame, a miracle occurred! For the disciples walked across the platform on their Graduation Day! They transformed from disciples—mere followers—to apostles! Vital, faithful, strong leaders, messengers. Tellers of the story in their *own* lives—what Jesus’ life, mission and message had meant for *them*; how the experience of walking with Christ in the light of God had changed *their* lives!

The disciples walked across the threshold on that day, as Jesus left them in one way and was oh-so-present to them in another. As they claimed their *own* calling to widen the witness. Widen the circle of their “Club of 12” to the whole world!

III. CIRCLES OF ALL KINDS

And us. What will *we* do—on this Ascension Day? As we, too, are charged to “quit gawking and start walking.” As we graduate into a new chapter in our discipleship.” As we are commissioned to “be witnesses” to all our home town, county, country and world?

What will YOU witness to? How will you draw the circle wide? In your *own* sphere?

Your home, and your family?

Then, out from there—like ripples in a pond: How will *you* widen the witness of Jesus’ More Excellent Way—the Way of Love and Compassion—of *true* concern for all God’s creatures—*all* our neighbors *and* our enemies—near and far.

In our work environments? In this community? In our country? In our church?

IV. MEMORIAL DAY

Ascension Day is also part of Memorial Day weekend this year, and that gives us the perfect opportunity to draw the circle wider. Even as we mark this important time of honoring and remembering.

Memorial Day is an interesting holiday, filled with a varied history and understanding. Some scolding even occurs, as people are reminded not to just launch summer and have BBQ’s without taking time to remember the “true meaning.”

But, even here is a great example of an ever-widening circle. Memorial Day was first begun—in part of its current form—at the time of the Civil War, and was only to commemorate those who had “given their all”—made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our country. Celebrating and honoring living Veterans was to be saved for Veteran’s Day in November.

But, the understanding of that has broadened over the years, and all who are serving and have served are thought important to remember. That’s a good development, I think!

And.....Memorial Day also traces its roots to the earlier celebration called **Decoration Day** (still carried out today in some parts of the south), which saw families gathering around family graveyards to honor remote ancestors as well as those who were deceased more recently. To have an extended family reunion—with folks traveling hundreds of miles.

These elaborate and important gatherings would see people coming around the graves, cleaning up the graves and headstones, putting flowers on them. It would find folks who hadn’t seen each other in forever—if ever—renewing contacts with relatives and long-lost friends and memories.

There was often a religious service and a picnic-like "dinner on the grounds," the traditional term for a potluck meal at a church. It is believed that this practice began before the American Civil War and thus may reflect the *real* origin of the "memorial day" idea.

So, as we celebrate this and every Memorial Day, we can remember to widen the circle. Broaden our understanding of what it has meant over the centuries and generations. And, broaden our own understanding of what it is like for our vets and those who have lost loved ones in the service. What is it like to serve in the military? To risk laying down your life. To grieve the loss of those who did.

People’s experiences of “the service” are very different. The response to their desire to serve is very different –from their family and friends, and the memory in the media. Even in their churches. You might be surprised at what you discover—if you just ask someone about that experience.

This Memorial Day, widen the circle by asking someone to share their story with you. Remember together.

V. PORTLAND TRAGEDY

Another kind of “laying down ones life in the service of fellow-country-ones” happened this Memorial Day Weekend. On the Eve of Ramadan—a high holy day for our Muslim brothers and sisters—something comparable in weight to Christmas Eve for us.

And, this one event might send us cowering back into our comfort zones, even more *afraid* to widen the circle ever again. In fact, you might be planning your silent protest to this sermon right now!

“But Rev! Look what these people did in trying to fight for a wider, more inclusive circle. They lost their very lives! I’m not going down *that* path! You can get killed!” Defending the stranger is not safe these days!”

Yes, yesterday, in my beloved home town of Portland, Oregon, three young men in the prime of their lives, stood up to hate. Came to the defense of victims of horrible abusive language and vicious assault.

And, their defense of their neighbor lost two of them their lives, when the attacker turned on them with a knife and fatally stabbed them. On a Maxx Train—the friendly light rail that we all take to get around Portland all the time. In broad daylight. In a nice part of town—the Hollywood District.

The men who fell victim were not even *attacking* the one causing harm. They were standing in solidarity with the women being assaulted. Trying to diffuse the situation; calm the hateful speech. Be Good Samaritans. What any of us would do if we found ourselves in that situation, right?

But, take caution: this story is not an “easy out.” A reason to point to, and say, “Whoa! See? I’m not going to get involved with *those* people. It’s not up to me to widen the circle *that* much. I might get hurt!”

What would Jesus do? What *did* Jesus do, but to stand up to oppression; to say NO to things that were clearly just plain wrong. To put his life on the line for the least of these. In order to “draw the circle wide.” To embrace everyone—at *whatever* level on the hierarchy.

No, tragic, frightening events like these call us to stand up even *more* loudly, in defense of our neighbor. To proclaim even more resolutely that we will NOT be ruled by fear; cowering in the corner, or the back of the bus or train.

From UCC Pastor Lynne Smouse in Portland:

(An example of a wide embrace—for *all* the victims in this scene.)

Words cannot describe the horror and the sorrow that comes with the news we received yesterday about the stabbing deaths of the good Samaritans who came to the aid of two young women. The vulnerable women were picked out to belittle and threaten.

One can only guess at how much fear that the women, the surviving stabbing victim, the families of those who have died and those surrounding the tragedy must feel. With this senseless act of hate and violence, comes a reason for people to become more guarded, more drawn in to themselves, more afraid to speak up or help those in need.

We cannot let fear win. We cannot let violence and hate win. We must not back down but must speak out. We must pray for the strength and the courage to stand up to hate and stand up for compassion.

I pray for the victims of the stabbings and those who love them, for healing for the survivor. I pray for the women that they find strength, healing and feel compassion from all. I pray for all who are traumatized by hate and violence.

I also pray for the *man who attacked the women*, who killed their defenders and who is filled with sickness and hate. I pray that he might find a way to *also* heal.

Accounts from across the pond in Manchester, England this week also demonstrate a widening of understanding for “who is my neighbor.” After the terrible terrorist killing and injuring of so many young people in the theater, common everyday folk did countless uncommon things to widen the embrace. Taxi drivers drove countless people home and refused to accept fares. Realtors and lodging owners found places to stay and live for harmed people at no or little charge. The list goes on.....

VI. WIDEN ALL KINDS OF CIRCLES!

Yesterday, I was working on our labyrinth circle. It’s a circle of rocks we started years ago, up the hill from our cabin, with the dream of building a Prayer Labyrinth. It’s never been the right time to complete the task, but yesterday I worked on it in the crazy weather, thinking about circles and how we *expand* our circles—draw our various circles wider.

Now, years back when we planned the Prayer Labyrinth, using a “Man in the Maze” Native Indian design, we did the math wrong. This starting circle that now needs to be filled in with rocks and paths is QUITE a bit bigger circle than we anticipated!

And, maybe that's a good thing. It *does* allow one to ride a horse around it while one is praying. My Satin Horse is quite good at praying in a circle.

As I worked in the quiet, I thought that a holiday weekend and

the start of summer in Buena Vista is the *perfect* time to reflect on this question: How *able* are we to expand our communal circle?

I know, I have only been here eight years, and that I am the first to head for the hills when the traffic gets too crazy! While it’s wonderful to see the town thriving and life able to go on here all year long, boy is it easy to feel invaded, too!

I *say* that while looking out and all of you who are here visiting today, and we are thrilled to have you—for the record!

I am going to challenge us—all of us—all summer long—to look at widening our embrace.

How *do* we let people know that this is truly a safe warm and welcoming place—“no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey?”

How long has it been since we have invited someone to join us for worship? It's been a couple years since we had friends Sunday in November.

I think *every* Sunday in the summer especially should be Invite a Friend Sunday!

Our community is *filled* with visitors and people here only this season—let's make *sure* they are invited and welcomed *warmly* to commune with us, sing, pray and grow together in the faith of the Body of Christ

Keepers of the Aquarium

Paul Harvey once said, "Too many Christians are no longer fishers of men but keepers of the aquarium."

I take that to mean that we Christians are more concerned about preserving the Church than we are about touching the lives of other people, more concerned about preserving our "religion" than we are about helping people discover the source of wholeness, the fountain of living water that wells up to eternal life.

(Richard J. Fairchild, The Last Words of Jesus)

And, this widening the embrace is not just for *outside* our church walls, either. Within our own church family and worshiping congregation, we encompass the full spectrum of life journeys, experiences, theological beliefs, political spectrum, faith life backgrounds.

How do we widen the embrace to come to understand one another better? Music style and preference is a perfect example. Many of us bring song offerings to worship—of all different meanings and styles. Ask one another about the music. What is meaningful to the person bringing it? Don't write it off as "that new, contemporary stuff" or "That's not a theology I agree with." Let's expand our understanding and expressions, not limit them. That's part of drawing the circle wider.

This feeds into all our aspects of ministry together as a congregation. The mission projects we take on. The groups we invite in to our community hub here. The ministries and gatherings we undertake. Ask each other about these new ideas. These callings to widen the circle and embrace others and others' ideas and expressions.

VII. NOW, GO!!

Now, go! Go out into the world as Christ witnesses. Don't stand gawking at the sky in despair, wondering when our guide and leader will return. He's put us in place and sends the advocate the counselor to walk with us.

And he's giving us a big job to do! Go and be my witnesses. Your homes. On your street. And Buena Vista. Chaffee County. Colorado. In the US of a. Draw the circle wide. Then draw it wider still. No one stands alone, standing side by side.

Don't be paralyzed. Be mesmerized! Enraptured, excited about what you've seen and heard. The message you've been given to share. The community you have found in the Body of Christ, and want to invite others into as well. Be devoted to prayer—men and

women alike!

So, they quit gawking at the empty sky, wondering what on earth to do now.

¹²⁻¹³ they left the mountain called Olives and returned to Jerusalem. It was a little over half a mile. They went to the upper room they had been using as a meeting place:

¹⁴ They agreed they were in this for good, completely together in prayer, the women included. Also Jesus' mother, Mary, and his brothers. Amen

**Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still.
Let this be our song, no one stands alone,
standing side by side, draw the circle wide.**

**2. Let our hearts touch far horizons,
so encompass great and small;
let our loving know no borders,
faithful to God's call.**

**3. Let the dreams we dream be larger,
than we've ever dreamed before;
Let the dream of Christ be in us,
open every door.**