

## Hindering God: Sermon to Acts 11:1-18

I've got to be honest with you this evening. I am a bit nervous. People sometimes ask me if I get nervous before I preach, and usually I tell them "not such much nervous as expectant, but maybe a little nervous." Today, I can say that I am nervous, and I am nervous for a few reasons. First, I am in a new place with new people and not in the comfort zone of my old familiar pulpit back in Tennessee. Secondly, stepping into a pulpit on any given Sunday is a bit like jumping out of an airplane. Once I am up here, I am up here--with only the wind of the Holy Spirit buoying up my Scriptural parachute, hoping against hope that I land in one piece. Of course, I pray and study and prepare my manuscript with great detail and forethought, but the end result is always God's doing, not mine, and that is a bit frightening.

And then there is the text...most of the time, I don't choose the text, instead it chooses me. Preaching from the lectionary calendar does not give one the luxury of preaching only those texts which will go down easy. Instead, I am given a list of texts for the day and attempt to hear God's speaking to me through them. Sometimes, I want to whine like Moses or Jonah, protesting what God is leading me to say; but in the end, it doesn't do much good. When people try to outsmart God, they can get swallowed by a big fish or stuck out in the wilderness for forty years, neither of which sounds all that appealing.

And our text for today also makes me nervous, so I can only imagine how frazzled Peter's nerves must be. Just when Peter thinks that he has gotten a handle on what God is doing in the world, God up and does something else. Peter and the other disciples are still reeling from the resurrection, another one of God's unimaginable ideas, and now they are attempting to create a church in the midst of a hostile Roman empire while also being faithful to their identities as Jews. We meet Peter under fire from the other apostles and Judeans in Jerusalem who have heard rumors about Peter and his choice of table fellows. The word on the street is that Peter has sold out, caved to the cultural influences around him, and taken up with the Gentiles. Peter is now getting an earful from those circumcised believers who are distraught at what they interpret as Peter's betrayal to the very ways of God.

At this point, we, Gentiles sitting here today, may be tempted to dismiss the concerns of the Judeans about diet and table fellowship. However, we might want to be careful before we do, as their struggle is becoming increasingly more familiar to us in our current context. We should perhaps be a bit more sympathetic to the difficulty which these devout Jews face in maintaining their identity in the Roman world which continues to oppress and persecute them. If they do not carefully guard their unique identity as Jews, they will certainly be absorbed right into the culture, losing their traditions, their heritage, and ultimately their identity as God's chosen people. And, one of the most central ways that these Jewish followers of Christ are set apart from the rest of the culture is through their dietary law.

We have a hard time comprehending how sacrosanct these particular laws are to these Jewish communities who are drowning in the influence of Roman life and culture. To make the point, Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal preacher from the U.S. says:

I wish there were some way we could understand how important dietary law has been to the people of Israel. Most of us have eaten bacon all our lives, and we do not think twice about combining milk and meat, but if we were first century Jews, the very thought would make us break out in a cold sweat. It would be like coming to church one morning to find pork chops and whiskey on the altar instead of bread and wine (76).

We often hear voiced the fear that contemporary Christians are selling out to the culture, allowing cultural norms to erode long held traditions and practices. And yes, there is a great deal of truth to that claim, particularly, I would argue, as it applies to an emphasis of U.S. culture on accumulation of wealth and power, as well as the promotion of militarism and violence as an acceptable way to solve problems. And yet, we also know that historically, the powerful institution of the church has also chosen to selectively resist real God-inspired change by hiding behind the facade of "protecting the faith" from the culture saying, "but we have always done it this way so that must mean God approves." In other words, the church has often had to be dragged kicking and screaming into new understandings of what God is doing in its midst. For the struggling Jewish/Christian community we meet in Acts, their fear of acculturation is well founded, for many believe that it will only take a pinch of pork or a little intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles to destroy the community which they have worked so hard to preserve.

And frankly, Peter could not agree with them more, which makes this turn of events so painful for him. After all, what happens to Peter in this story is not Peter's doing. If he had any say, he wouldn't be sitting in the hot seat now. And yet, God has dragged him kicking and screaming to this new understanding of God's purposes, and like it or not, he has to deal with it if he is going to be faithful to the God he loves. So Peter begins to rehash the story, not only the story of how the Gentile Cornelius is converted by Peter, but also, how Peter the Jew, is converted by Cornelius.

I can practically see the sweat beading up on Peter's brow as he explains himself to his angry brothers in the faith. He tells them that he is praying one day in Joppa and becomes entranced by a vision of a large sheet dropping down from heaven which is full of four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds. Peter explains that he hears a voice from heaven saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." Initially, Peter is disgusted. Such an idea of eating one of those unclean creatures is utter blasphemy, nonsense. Nothing unclean has ever touched his lips. He must be delusional. And yet the voice speaks a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And then as others times before, Peter has to be told the third time that God is doing a new thing, making these formerly unclean things, clean, even for Peter.

Then, as he is recovering from the vision, some men from Caesarea come to Peter's home and ask him to go with them to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who is well thought of among the Jews. Peter, left to his own inclinations, would have probably refused the invitation as he is so troubled by the vision, but he is instructed, not by his own agenda nor his uncanny ability to get into trouble, but instead by the Spirit, to go with them, making no distinction between them and his own people.

Let me pause here and say that such an attempt to disregard the distinctions between them is absurd. Of course, there are distinctions, big distinctions. Peter is a Jew--circumcised, special laws and customs, persecuted by the Roman Empire and happens to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. Cornelius is a Gentile-uncircumcised, a Roman soldier (remember these are the guys that killed Jesus), eats and drinks whatever he wants, is not one of the chosen, has no share in the covenant, is a pagan. Denying the distinctions between them is absurd, being distinct from the rest of the world is exactly what the Jews have been encouraged to be since the beginning, and yet, disregarding those distinctions is now exactly what God tells him to do.

And much to Peter's shock as he enters the house and begins to share with these Gentiles the message of the gospel, the same Holy Spirit which blows over the waters of creation, which inspires the prophets, which is proclaimed by Jesus, this same Spirit falls upon this group of Gentiles just as Peter remembers that Jesus says it would--"John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." At that moment, as Cornelius and his household are overcome with the reconciling power of God's Holy Spirit, so too is Peter, as he realizes that if it is God who has given these unclean Gentiles the Holy Spirit, who is he to hinder God?

I don't think we can fully grasp what a 180 degree shift this realization is for Peter. And as he stands there before the other apostles and Judeans defending himself, he is out there without even a Scriptural parachute. Though in the Hebrew Scriptures, God is clearly the God of all creation and all people, Jews understood that those who would become followers of Yahweh would also adhere to the law. Nowhere does God instruct them to disregard it. Even Jesus says that he has come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And yet, Peter is now saying that these Gentiles have a share in the covenant, in the power of the Holy Spirit, just as he does without adherence to Jewish notions of clean and unclean, not because of anything Peter is doing but because of what God is doing.

The struggle for those Jews in the first century and for us today is to recognize the work of God, even when it does not fit into the long standing traditions and contexts in which our faith has been situated. And though the Holy Spirit seems completely unpredictable to Peter and to us in this story, in very key ways, the Holy Spirit is doing just what we might expect her to do. For although we may not be prepared for the Spirit's every expression, we can count on this: the Spirit is motivated by the love of God for all people without condition, the love which led Jesus Christ to die. The Holy Spirit of God is a Spirit that reconciles people to God and people to one another. This Spirit is determined to destroy the barriers that we erect between each other and to make former enemies become friends. The Holy Spirit is an equal opportunity paraclete who does not check one's gender, or race, or nationality, or sexual orientation, before choosing to use someone for the building up for God's beloved community. And if the Holy Spirit does not regard such distinctions, who are we to do so?

Why do we, the church, still have such a hard time believing that God does not show partiality? Why do so many of our churches continue to hinder the Holy Spirit by affirming God's call only in the lives of those of our brothers and sisters who are of one sexual orientation and continue to deny that call in the lives of our sisters and brother who happen to be of another orientation? Believe me, I often want to avoid discussing the treatment of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in the church, not because I don't feel strongly about it, but because I don't need the grief I sometimes get for it. But, I don't have a choice, friends, because God is not leaving this injustice alone. God is not leaving me alone and therefore, we cannot leave God's church alone. And frankly, none of us has it all figured out yet, do we? We are all still in the process of conversion here. I have never pretended to fully understand the ways of God, but through my relationships and experiences with the most unlikely people in the most unlikely circumstances, God keeps changing me, and I, too, have come to acknowledge, along with Peter, that the God we meet in Jesus Christ is not partial. The only thing that I am sure of concerning God is that God's mysterious ways among us are always the ways of love, love so powerful, so able to triumph, that even death itself is rendered powerless. I am sure of that truth. And, I am also fairly sure that even after this encounter with Cornelius, Peter continues to wrestle with how the Gentiles can possibly fit into God's covenant promise to the Jews. But, Peter, even in his confusion, affirms by his on-going conversion that with God all things are possible. Our story from Acts today seeks to help the church be the church, to confirm its struggles, and also to be open to on-going conversion by the power of our God to overcome every barrier which divides us. Will

Willimon writes that: Here is a God who takes me, "Just as I am without one plea," as we are fond of singing in the old hymn, but encounters with this God do not leave us just as we are (104).

Peter is not the same man after his encounter with Cornelius. Instead, his ability to love and welcome and include is pushed beyond its former limits by a God whose love knows no such limits. We are God's people. Such limitless love is our calling as well, and who are we to hinder God? Who are we to hinder God?

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#### Works Cited

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