

“Who are we to hinder God?” by Rev. Dr. Peter A. Thompson

Acts 11:1-18

As we go about our business in the church (as the church), the world is watching. Does the church have anything to offer that differs from other groups characterized by dissension and division? Can the church listen to each other and seek to discover where God’s Spirit is leading? Can the church broaden the table, so everyone has a place?

I want to encourage us to hold on to these questions as we hear Luke’s retelling of Peter testifying in Jerusalem before a feisty group of critics. You can find it in Acts 10, but we are going to read it from Acts 11. It’s repetition cues theological importance and says to us, “Pay attention!”

### **Read Acts 11:1-18**

The news traveled fast. Non-Jewish ‘outsiders’ were now ‘in’ and it was Peter who had a target on his back. “What do you think you are doing Peter?” “Why are you rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited, and ruining our good name?” The other leaders, and I would guess some of them even friends of Peter’s, called Peter out on the carpet for breaking some of the most basic ritual laws. Perhaps the biggest one was that Peter had eaten with the uncircumcised. A similar charge had been leveled against Jesus for eating with sinners (Luke 15:2). Peter may have been in good company, but it did not make his confrontation easy.

It may not seem like a big deal, but early traditions support gathering around the table as a reserved act for those you associate with; people most like you. The table was not a place for “them or those” whoever “them or those” might be. But not only was Peter at the table with “the others”, he rubbed shoulders with “them and those”, meaning he associated with them, was friendly with them, fraternized with them, and hung out with them. And on top of that, Peter ate what the Jews considered unclean food. As a Jew, what Peter was found out doing was a big deal to other Jews based on the rituals and laws they had grown passionate about and were following. Based on these acts, to his critics, Peter had gone off the rails. Some may have even gone as far to suggest Peter no longer belongs.

So, Peter is called before them, hears their criticism, and then responds to it with a story. His story reveals that God told him to do it. “God said it was ok, and so it’s ok,” right? As we might be waiting for a “Is that your final answer?”, we know that Peter is confident in saying, “That is my story, and I am sticking to it.” Peter didn’t come up with some lame excuse and he didn’t react to their condemnation of him with frustration. Peter shared a story, and most importantly, it was God’s story.

I want to take a moment to recognize how Peter responds because there is a lesson in it. His response is not argumentative or tightly reasoned. Had Peter come to argue and come back at the church leaders with theological points or gotten into a doctrinal debate, he might not have been able to affect them as much. Generally speaking, arguments tend to crystallize differences. Debates tend to keep two sides apart. However, a story, and particularly one of God's, changes hearts and lives. Stories invite people across the separating chasm. Jesus did this masterfully in his teachings as he used parables, which left people with questions for them to explore, rather than theological issues for them to debate. We are often left with questions like, "How do we do this?" and "What might this look like for us today?" Like Jesus' teachings and stories, the story Peter shares changes hearts. We know this from the transformation that takes place of those who begin with criticism, are moved to silence, and then after hearing the story are witnessed praising God. When it is God's story, tell it, and stick to it. You never know whose heart and mind it may change.

Here is the thing. Peter was not seeking to break the rules. He was not trying to go outside accepted norms. He was not trying to cause a disturbance or a ruckus. God intervened in his life, speaking to him in a vision and a voice, calling Peter to overcome his stereotypes and distinctions and see his mission in more universal terms. Peter could truthfully say that he did not take the initiative in any of this. The vision came to him from God.

The importance here is God's initiative as the gift-giver. God used Peter as a witness to reveal God's message. God empowered Peter, an ordinary fisherman, to play a significant role in the mission of the church. We could read it as though Peter's message was, "This is my story, but it could as easily have been your story. This could have happened to you. What would you have done if God had appeared and spoken to you in this way? Would you, could you, have acted differently?" More specifically Peter asked, "Who was I to hinder God? Who was I to resist God?"

Think about the insight contained in that question. If God so loved the world that Jesus came not to condemn the whole world but to save it, who are we to try to limit the mission of God to redeem humanity? Who are we to hinder God?

The issue Peter was addressing was, "Would the Gentiles have a place?" No issue was more debated by the early Jews or more important to them than whether their newfound faith was intended only for Jews or whether it was to include Gentiles while allowing them to remain Gentiles. A Gentile was considered anyone outside the Jewish people, uncircumcised and unwilling to convert to Judaism. "Would 'those people' have a place" was the question hanging in the balance along with the integrity and expansion of the early church.

In short, the answer was, "Yes, the Gentiles would have a place." The vision given to Peter by God declared, "Then the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the

beginning.” After that Peter said, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

Who belongs in God’s church? Another way to ask this is to ask upon whom has God’s gift of the Holy Spirit fallen? Do you remember the questions I asked at the beginning today, right before I read the text in Acts 11? Does the church have anything to offer that differs from other groups characterized by dissension and division? Can the church listen to each other and seek to discover where God’s Spirit is leading? Can the church broaden the table, so everyone has a place?

Yes, the church does have something to offer that differs from dissension and division. And to borrow a page out of our Lent and Easter messages, yes, the church can listen to each other and seek to discover where God’s spirit is leading and yes, the church can broaden the table, so everyone has a place. To be clear, the church does and can because God does and can. But will the church? Will we?

Will we accept change as a part of God’s story? Change of heart and change of mind? The change of heart and mind exemplified in Acts comes when one sees the Spirit at work in the stories of strangers, recognizing in them the same Spirit that is working in one’s own life. It is the proclamation, “There are a variety of gifts and talents, but it is the same Spirit who gives them.” For a change of heart and mind, we need to see God at God’s surprising work. Out of that becomes our theological doctrines.

Will we accept those whom God has chosen, even if they are “them and those”? Will we rub shoulders with, get to know, talk with, share with, eat with, pray with, others who may be strangers to us now but can become friends through faith?

Will we honor that God enables ordinary people to become witnesses to the gospel? I like to say that God doesn’t just call the qualified but qualifies the called, which serves to void out any excuses we have that we may not be gifted enough, old enough, or good enough to get the job done. God has heard all the “dog ate my homework” excuses. God is not buying our excuses, because God is doing the empowering.

Who are we to hinder God?

Yesterday I was playing in the yard with our boys, and they wanted to play catch and practice hitting. Music to my baseball loving ears. As their coach pitch coach, and someone who has played a few baseball games in my short life, with a good amount of catching, hitting, and coaching experience at a high level, I thought maybe I had a good opportunity to share some of my thoughts on how they could be more consistent and successful in hitting. To be fair, they were both frustrated they weren’t hitting a homerun every time. Naturally, I tried offering a few pointers. The first swing would

attempt at following the advice and then they would go right back to what they were doing before. At one point I stopped and looked at Luke and said, "I can help you. I have done this a lot. You are just learning. You can listen and try to follow what I am suggesting, or you can try to do it on your own. I promise what I am asking you to do will help you." What I witness in coaching is that it is hard being 8 and having to decide whether to listen to advice from a coach. It may just be more fun swinging as hard as your little body allows and spinning in circles.

The more important question for us today is whether it is hard being a child of God and having to decide whether to listen to advice from God?

**The prophet Isaiah declared, "God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God's ways are not our ways. God's ways are *higher* than our ways. God's thoughts are *higher* than our thoughts."** Isaiah 55:8-9

We can either humble ourselves before the Lord, trusting God's thoughts and God's ways, AND (here's the key...) we can follow God, or we can allow that ancient sin of pride to take control, to harden our hearts to the winds of God's changing work, and we can deceive ourselves into thinking that we have it all figured out, and that we know better than God. God's ultimate work cannot be hindered, so when God reveals God's will and God's way, we must decide whether we will follow God? Or will we try to stand in God's way? Will we be known as ambassadors of God's Kingdom, or obstacles?

Peter doesn't step aside and move out of God's way. Peter gets on board! And he follows the leading of God, even into something new and previously unknown. Peter says, "I'm not standing in God's way!" "I'm not going to put up barriers that the Lord has removed."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God does not erect barriers, God breaks them down in Jesus. The distinction is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, black or white, right or left. The new covenant, the new distinction is "in Jesus" or not, "in faith" or not, "new creation" or not, "love one another" or not, "Praise the Lord" or not. The rest of the distinctions the Lord removes.

Who are we to hinder God?

Let us Pray...

Gracious and Eternal God, we don't want to hinder you, your will, and your way. We want to get on board with whatever your Spirit is calling us to do. We want to be ambassadors of your Kingdom. We accept that this can mean change and we pray for courage and strength amid the transformation. We accept that this can mean rubbing shoulders with others we may not know yet and we pray for open ears and hearts to understand and be bold. We honor your call to each of us as instruments of your light and love, being witnesses to your good news, and we pray your Spirit would fill us with confidence and willingness to serve you faithfully.

We praise you God for being in touch with us and giving us opportunities to be your disciples. We praise you for the gift of the Holy Spirit that transforms us from ordinary to extraordinary. We praise you for being a part of our story, bridging the gap of the great chasms we create, and we pray that we can tell of your mighty works and deeds and messages so the whole world can know of your love and mercy.

Your message is for us all, whether we are here in this place or traveling, sitting or standing, lying in a hospital bed or playing a game, having been to worship you often or not nearly enough, having treated others fairly and with love or been bitter and argumentative. We pray God for healing, peace, understanding, wisdom, truth, and love. Your grace is for us all and we celebrate being enough in your eyes. We celebrate your children everywhere being enough in your eyes.

O for a world, God. O for a world, where everyone respects each other's ways, where love is lived, and all is done with justice and with praise. O for a world, where we welcome one world family and struggle with each choice that opens us to unity and gives your vision voice.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, who taught his disciples of every time and place to pray together... **Our Father...**