

WHO AM I, THAT I SHOULD HINDER GOD?

Acts 11:1-18; Fifth Sunday of Easter, c

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Prayer: Startle us, O God, with your truth. May your Spirit open our minds and hearts to the word you have for us today. Open us to your word made flesh in Jesus Christ, and embodied in this particular body of Christ, the church. Amen.

Thursday a week ago, there was a fascinating one-hour show on WKNO on the Boss Crump machine that dominated Memphis and Tennessee from the 1920s through the 1950s. I'm sure it will come on again and I recommend it. It helped me to understand why Memphis is so "Memphis."

I am no stranger to political machines. I grew up in Virginia, which at the time was ruled by the Byrd machine. Senator Harry Byrd Sr. had his way in almost any political matters, and then he bequeathed his seat to his son, Harry Jr. It was said that Virginia had a government "of the Byrds, by the Byrds, and for the Byrds."

One of the memories etched in my mind was of the elder Senator Byrd arguing against civil rights legislation. He was an avid segregationist and supported what was called "massive resistance" when the Supreme Court struck down "separate but equal" schools, and he urged parents to take their children out of schools that integrated. On this one particular occasion that I remember, he looked into the crowd and loudly intoned a sentiment shared by many in that era: "You can't go against the Bible!"

Ah, but we did, didn't we? The Bible didn't change. It was the same yesterday, the same today, and will be the same tomorrow. But the Holy Spirit of God led us to go against the Bible, or at least against that reading of the Bible which would claim that God's Word upholds slavery or racism. The Spirit is like that. The Spirit leads into new and sometimes surprising understandings. We know now that while a passage or two in the Bible may indeed seem to endorse slavery, when it comes taken as a whole, we see that the scriptures proclaim a God whose love knows no color boundaries and whose justice tolerates no racial oppression.

Just a few months ago I was talking with a pastor from another denomination. I generally try to avoid controversial subjects with my "brethren" from other denominations (and they always are "brethren" in this particular denomination), but he started quizzing me on why the PC(USA) church ordains women. I started talking about the fact that the first evangelist in the Gospels was a woman (the woman at the well who ran to tell others about Jesus), and the first one to proclaim the good news of the resurrection was a woman (God entrusted Mary Magdalene with that earth-shattering news). I told him about the leadership in the early church that women provided. We find that in Paul's epistles and in the Book of Acts. I quoted scripture for this bible-believing soul: "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." I even shared

with him the fact that the earliest depictions of the Lord's Supper that have ever been found, pictures found on the walls in the catacombs, depict women sitting at the table with our Lord. (That pre-dates Leonardo da Vinci's painted by centuries!)

He finally interrupted me and said "Well, the Bible says very clearly what the role of women should be: silent in church—and we don't depart from scripture!"

Ah, but *we* did, didn't we? We made the same arguments. Same Bible, same words, but we believe that the Holy Spirit led us to go against an understanding of scripture that had prevailed for over 1900 years, and to allow women to take their rightful and God ordained place in the leadership of the church. Yes, there are those who could point to a few isolated texts here and there that seem to exclude women and assign them to a lower echelon of moral and spiritual authority than men. But the Spirit of God was blowing across our denomination, and we saw that the Gospel, as a whole, which Jesus lived and proclaimed is one which excludes no one from full participation in the church on the basis of gender.

Peter knew his Bible. He would quote it on occasion and interpret it as he did on Pentecost. He knew that his people understood themselves to be a holy people of God. "Holy" not in the sense of being morally better than anyone else, but in the sense of being set apart, distinctive. Their laws, which seem strange to us today, were the only things that prevented God's people from being assimilated. A little bite of pork, a little pinch of incense for Caesar, a little intermarriage with the Romans, and before you know it God's distinctive people melt into the woodwork, lose their identity, disappear into the fabric of the dominant culture.¹ He knew his Bible. He knew his tradition.

But Peter had a dream. Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, must have felt this was a very, very important story in the life of the early church, probably *the* most important next to Pentecost, for he spent 66 verses in chapters 10 and 11 telling and retelling this story of Peter and Cornelius.

Peter had a dream, you see, that called him to go against the Bible, what the Bible taught and what God's people had believed for generations. For if he was going to follow that dream, and abolish dietary regulations, then Peter and the church would be threatened with a loss of distinctiveness. They would no longer be set apart—holy!

Yet Luke makes it abundantly clear that this confusing situation in which the Church found itself was the work of the Spirit. He tells us that God gave Peter a vision which is repeated three times, that no foods are unclean. This vision, of course, is not about food—it's about human beings. Through the vision the Spirit leads Peter to the recognition that no person whom God created is unclean.

And apparently that same Spirit was at work in Cornelius, the Gentile, which led him to send for Simon Peter. For Luke, you see, the Spirit is running way out ahead of the Church and its leaders. So much so that when word reached the believers back in the Jerusalem church about what Peter had done, he had some explaining to do. "Do you know that scripture forbids eating with Gentiles? And that food you ate ... that's an abomination! You can't go against scripture."

Peter told his story again, and said “You know, I know what you’re saying. I’ve been there, too. I used to think that the only way to remain distinctively the Church was to remain exclusive, but in fact, we cannot be the church if we closed the doors to anyone whom God has chosen. I thought the Church could not be the Church if it allowed a Gentile in. But now I see that the Church could not be the Church if it kept a Gentile out.”

He continued, “It was the same Spirit that was with us when we became believers that was at work here”. And then he asked a question that they could not answer: “Who am I that I should hinder God?”

Think about the insight of that question with me. If God so loved the world that Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save it, who are we to try to hinder God—to limit the mission of God to redeem humanity? Every time we exclude someone from the full participation in the redemptive efforts of God, Peter’s question should trouble us and the church. What if they had stuck to a literal interpretation of scripture and had not been open to the Spirit’s leading? They would have closed the door to Gentiles (that’s you and me for the most part!) and just remained a small Jewish sect.

What’s really remarkable about this story is not the conversion of Peter or Cornelius, but the conversion of the church. After their initial concern, the leaders in Jerusalem did not use the seven deadly words that kill a church: “We’ve never done it that way before.” They didn’t say “You are wrong! You’re out of your mind!” “You can’t go against the Bible!”

Instead, they listened and were open to the new reality Peter envisioned. And Luke claims it was because they were open to the Holy Spirit doing a new thing, that gave them the ability to listen and to change.

Over the centuries the Bible has not changed. But what has changed in the climate of interpretation and the lenses with which we read the Bible and the imagination with which we apply its teaching to our living. For if Jesus Christ is the living Lord, then the church always has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his Lordship, of following the Spirit’s lead so that we will expect surprises and new implications of the gospel which cannot be explained on any other basis than our Lord has shown us something we could not have seen on our own, even if we were looking only at scripture.

This story of the early Christian church is not simply a tale of a group of people who reach out to convert the world. It is, as well, the story of the Holy Spirit at work converting the church. What it means for me is that after all the Bible study, the exegesis, the reading of the text sometimes in its original Greek or Hebrew to try to understand it, after all the historical-critical analysis, after hearing all the voices that offer their wisdom on the text—that when, after all of that I am still unsure of its meaning today, I say to myself, “If I am going to err in interpreting the Bible, I am going to err on the side of grace. After all, ‘who am I that I should hinder the one, holy God of grace?’”

The world is watching us. Do we have anything to offer that differs from other groups characterized by dissension and division? Can we listen to each other and seek to discover where God's Spirit is leading us? Can we broaden the Table so everyone has a place?² Thanks be to God for the Spirit which is ever at work transforming us into the likeness of the One whose name we claim.

Amen.

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¹ William Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987). P. 96

² Joseph S. Harvard, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, 2009, p. 454.

Acts 11:1–18

1 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. **2** So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, **3** saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” **4** Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, **5** “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. **6** As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. **7** I also heard a voice saying to me, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ **8** But I replied, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ **9** But a second time the voice answered from heaven, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ **10** This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. **11** At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. **12** The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. **13** He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, “Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; **14** he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ **15** And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. **16** And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ **17** 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?” **18** When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”