

May 26, 2019

Acts 10, 11: 1-18

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please go with us into the study of your word. We seek your illumination as we try to understand its lessons. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

God's Favorites

One of my favorite shows is *Madam Secretary*, with Tea Leoni playing the secretary of state. The reason I like it is it tackles head on what I see as the two most critical issues of our time:

Climate change and the other damage to our environment.

And refugees.

It combines the issues by creating storylines around "climate refugees." Some countries virtually disappear because of rising seas, causing refugees that other nations have to take in.

Of course, you don't have to turn to a fictitious TV series to find refugee stories.

In the past two years, we have read about real-life families from Central America being separated at our Southern border.

About refugees from war-torn Syria flooding Europe.

About Dreamers who were brought here as infants or toddlers and are now threatened with deportation to a country they've never seen.

Besides these topical stories, we have also read ugly stories of racism with the resurgence of white nationalists and the Ku Klux Klan – incidents that I thought were relegated to our distant past. It turns out they were not.

The human condition, it seems, requires that we always have somebody to look down upon.

We build ourselves up by tearing someone else down. We hate for no other reason than someone is of a differing race or gender or nationality or ethnicity or economic status. For no other reason that someone is differently abled.

And because it is inherent in the human condition, we see it in ancient Palestine as well as modern America.

In the New Testament, the huge division was not black/white or male/female or nation against nation or even slave/free. Those issues were not resolved, necessarily. It was just that certain relationships were accepted as superior and inferior, and went unquestioned.

No, the big divide we see in the New Testament comes out of the fact that it is a theological document built upon the Jewish Bible. And so the big division is Jew and Gentile.

What we call the Old Testament was built entirely upon the premise that God chose Israel as his people. When we get to the New Testament and the arrival of Israel's Messiah, the question becomes: *Well, then, can only Jews be saved?* After all, he *was* their Messiah.

But in the opening of the book of Acts, the resurrected Jesus tells the disciples: **“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** (Acts 1: 8)

In Jerusalem and in Judea, presumably, the disciples would witness to Jews. But in Samaria and the ends of the earth? There, they would find Gentiles.

This was a huge issue for the early church, an issue so volatile that it can make our racial and ethnic issues pale. You may remember when Jewish leaders were trying to get Pontius Pilate to execute Jesus: They couldn't even enter his Gentile building because it would make them ritually unclean for the Passover.

In the midst of this complex society, Chapter 10 of Acts tells the amazing story of a Gentile Roman soldier named Cornelius, who had a vision. In that vision, an angel told him to invite the Jewish apostle Peter to his home.

Meanwhile, Peter, too, had a vision. He saw a large sheet being lowered from heaven filled with animals and reptiles and birds. A voice told him to eat.

“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” (Acts 10: 14)

This was simply a good answer for a good religious Jew. Dietary laws were an important part of keeping God’s law.

But then the voice told Peter, **“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”** (Acts 10: 15)

While Peter was trying to make sense of this dream, Cornelius’ men arrived at the house where he was staying. And the Holy Spirit told Peter to go with the men and take the gospel to Cornelius and his Gentile friends.

Here’s how Peter began speaking to them: **“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.”** (Acts 10: 28)

And then he asked Cornelius why he called for him. Cornelius revealed that his vision instructed him to send for Peter so that he and his people might learn about God.

And this is what Peter answered: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” : (Acts 10: 34-35)

God shows no partiality. Or as another translation puts it, *God does not show favoritism.* This is huge. The entire Old Testament was built upon God’s favoritism of Israel.

God does not show favoritism. This would have been a huge news story in the early days of the fledgling church Peter was helping to start. The Jews had always been a minority whose very existence depended on their ability to stay separate. Dietary laws and laws against intermarriage weren’t just religious niceties. They were the means of community survival.

So Peter’s radical pronouncement that God does not show favoritism does NOT go unnoticed. Our Scripture passage for today comes as the controversy hits over what Peter has dared to do – to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to **Acts 11: 1-18.**

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'

Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, '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.

As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth."

But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 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. 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; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved."

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 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."

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?'

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.'

Well, believe me, the fact that they had no further objections on *that* day didn't mean they wouldn't object in the future. Paul's letters to various churches are filled with arguments about the Jew-Gentile question, and filled with admonishments about how both Jew and Gentile are to be accepted into God's kingdom.

It is an issue that reverberates throughout the New Testament.

But here when the questions are in their infancy – Can only Jews accept Christ? Or can Gentiles accept this Jewish Messiah, too? – Peter absolutely nails the answer.

Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

God made Jew and Gentile. God made black and white and brown. God made Hispanic and Asian and Arab and Eskimo and Indian.

God made male and female. God made straight and gay and people who question their gender. God made people with bi-polar disorder and attention deficit disorder and cerebral palsy.

God made people who have vacation homes and people who have no homes. God made people predisposed to addiction and people who have no taste for drugs or alcohol. God made people who grew up in loving homes, and people who grew up with violent abusers.

Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

Peter reported to the protesters what God did through the Holy Spirit: The Spirit came upon Cornelius and his houseful of friends as surely as it came upon Peter and his friends.

As Peter explained to his critics: “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 was I that I could hinder God?

In a moment we are going to sing about this strange word, “hinder.” *Ride on, King Jesus, no man can a-hinder me!*

It comes from the very last word in the book of Acts. It’s a Greek word that our NRSV translates “without hindrance.” Or “unhindered.” Luke uses the word to describe Paul’s preaching in Rome, how he was **“proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, unhindered.”**

There has been much made of that odd and final word, especially since Luke knew that Paul was dead by the time he finished writing Acts. But he ends the book with Paul alive, and preaching the Word, *unhindered*. The gospel was spreading, *unhindered*.

Why? I imagine that Luke was trying to encourage a struggling community of new believers who found themselves very much hindered by their fear.

In today's passage in chapter 11 of Acts, another form of this word shows up -
- only this time it is the opposite, "hinder." And this time it is in the mouth of Peter.

"... who was I that I could hinder God?"

The conversion of Cornelius and Peter's defense of it is the single longest narrative in Acts. We read only a fraction of it. Clearly Luke views this move into Gentile territory as critically important.

People outside the Jewish community were being invited to belief in Christ. This was huge, and it wouldn't come easily for either side. As the new Christian church grew, there was continuing friction between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.

But the fact is, it was God's plan that everyone be invited into the kingdom. As Peter speaks so plainly:

I truly understand that God shows no partiality....

What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

... who was I that I could hinder God?

I imagine there are people who look at our church and think we are too open. Too open with communion. Too open with our theology. Too radical with our welcome.

If we are, this is why. I never want to face God and have to explain why I *hindered* someone coming into God's church.

It may be that racism and sexism and nationalism and all the other –isms that divide us -- will be with us for as long as we live on this earth. It may take Jesus' second coming to erase that hatred and hatefulness from our fallen hearts.

But I am not appeased by that answer.

We as the church – and especially we as one of the most diverse congregations in Greenville – need to be at the forefront in combating these hateful “isms” whenever we see and hear them. And we have plenty of opportunity because they are all around us.

Unfortunately, in the intervening centuries since Luke wrote down Peter's words, lots of us have hindered God. We have pointed fingers and we have ridiculed and we have feared and we have hated.

Let us make it our goal to refuse to participate when the ugly gossip and accusations swirl around us, when election year fear-mongers whip up hatred of the other. Peter has already provided our response:

Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

Amen.