“Who was I that I could hinder God?”

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Acts 11:1-18

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***Acts 11:1-18***

***11 Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%2011%3A1-18%0A&version=NRSVue&interface=print&showfootnotes=no&showxrefs=no&showheadings=no&showwoj=no#fen-NRSVUE-27298a)***] criticized him, 3saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” 4Then 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. 6As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ 8But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ 9But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ 10This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. 11At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 12The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.[***[***b***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%2011%3A1-18%0A&version=NRSVue&interface=print&showfootnotes=no&showxrefs=no&showheadings=no&showwoj=no#fen-NRSVUE-27308b)***] These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. 13He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; 14he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ 15And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 16And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ 17If 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?” 18When 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.”***

When I was new to the Church and wanted to learn something about what I was getting into, I took the only class from the seminary in San Rafael that was offered at night. Presbyterian Polity. The title alone was not helpful. I had never used the word Polity before and was reconsidering my idea to take a class. Polity is just a fancy word for “form of government” or “order of government.” How would a polity class help a neophyte? The class didn’t mean anything to me at first, but certain experiences in the class have remained with me in some very important ways. One of those experiences was the final class session where we were each asked, “Knowing the Book of Order (form of government) as you do now, if you could change one thing, what would you change?”

This would have been in early 1992. At that time in our denomination, across the country, discussion and debates were raging about inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people and leadership positions in churches. “Several Presbyterian churches took issue with [the ruling that opposed inclusion] and declared themselves to be “More Light” Churches because there was “yet more light to shine forth on the scriptures.” 1992 was the year that these churches formally joined together as the More Light Churches Network.

The seminary class I was taking was being taught by Rev. Jack Rogers, who would later write the book called “Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church.” (2006) So there I was, new to the bay area, new to any kind of church, and in the midst of a charged political church atmosphere, being asked what I would change about a form of government I essentially knew only 12 weeks’ worth of knowledge about. With all of the conversation in the air about who was included in the church, I answered the question saying that I would change it so that *all really meant all*. Jack Rogers didn’t write his book until 2006, and in 2008 the San Francisco Presbytery became the first presbytery in the nation to vote in the affirmative to allow an openly gay woman to be ordained as clergy in our Presbytery. Here at Bethany, a More Light Church since 2011, we continue the work of inclusion for all into the body of Christ, into Christ’s church, into every and all roles that the PC(USA) denomination has to offer.

I tell you this story of our denomination’s journey toward inclusion for all, by no means complete, in order to illustrate that the work described by Peter in today’s text is still continuing today.

Our text for today is the end of the longest narrative in the Luke/Acts books. Beginning back in chapter 10 the author of Acts begins to tell us the story of Cornelius. Divided into three parts, the story of Cornelius needs to be described at least in part, in order to understand the importance of Peter’s words to the people back in Jerusalem.

We have seen in our previous texts from the book of Acts, that the change of heart of one person often involves a vision for that person, a vision for someone sent to help them, and a community that works to support the change of heart. For example, Saul had a vision on the road to Damascus, was made blind, and brought to Damascus. Ananias then had a vision telling him to go to Saul and deliver God’s message to him. It took two complementary visions and also others who brought Saul to Damascus, and kept him safe for a time. Then last week, we heard about Peter coming to Lydda where he raised Tabitha/Dorcas from death. Peter performed the miracle with prayer, in Jesus’ name, in a private way but for a public display – in order that the impact of the miracle may move us to action. Today’s text involves another co-vision experience, this time between Cornelius and Peter.

Cornelius was a devout centurion. Devout means that he feared God and followed culturally appropriate Jewish purity laws and rituals but may not have been a part of a Temple. Centurion meant that he was a soldier in the Roman government. But he really represents Gentiles more than he represents the Roman world, so in the Acts text Cornelius is not one assigned a true outsider status. Cornelius had a vision telling him to send for Peter, who, when we last spoke of him, was staying with a certain Simon who was a Tanner. Likewise, Peter had a vision in which he learned that eating four footed creatures was not unclean because God makes unclean things clean. This vision was an indirect benefit to Peter. This vision did not explain anything about Cornelius, but as we would see as we continued to read chapter 10, became something Peter remembered when he was considering *other* unclean or impure rituals. Peter was told by the Spirit to go with the men who came for him and told not to make a distinction between them and himself. So when Peter got to Cornelius’ home he didn’t really know why he was there. And Cornelius didn’t really understand why he had been told to send for Peter.

The second part of this longest narrative in the Luke/Acts writings, takes place inside Cornelius’ house. This is where the rubber met the road in the life of Cornelius and in the ministry of Peter. The reason the people in Jerusalem, circumcised Jewish people, were upset about Peter eating with gentiles had to do with purity codes. Purity laws and rituals were very important in the 1st century. Author and commentator Karl Kuhn writes, “Purity codes for many Israelites, including these circumcised believers, emerged from and reinforced Israelite understandings of how creation, humanity, and daily life were to be ordered, or “mapped out.” “Purity codes reflected essential elements of their worldview that defined their role and place as the people of God.” Much of the new testament leaves us with the idea that Jews and gentiles were enemies or at least were never to have anything to do with one another. In truth, Jews and gentiles were often engaged in social and business situations with one another. The difference that those in Jerusalem were upset with was that Peter was in the home of Cornelius. In the home, as a guest, it would have been more difficult to share mutually exclusive dietary restrictions, or other rituals.

Both Peter and Cornelius were moved by their previous visions to go to and send for the other, but did not know why. Peter said to Cornelius,  “You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?” And Cornelius said to Peter, after explaining his vision, “So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.”

In Acts 10:44, just prior to today’s text we read, “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. **45**The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the gentiles, **46**for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, **47**“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Today’s text then, the third part of the long Cornelius narrative, is the report Peter is giving to those in Jerusalem after his experience with Cornelius. We will celebrate the day of Pentecost in a few weeks when we will go back to the beginning of the book of Acts and read about the Holy Spirit coming and people speaking in other languages. What Peter described to those in Jerusalem was the gentiles’ own Pentecost moment. It was not Peter’s words or preaching or teaching that convinced the household of Cornelius to be baptized. It was the holy spirit that did that. It was the direct experience of those present that led to their change of heart. It was the holy spirit that taught Peter that the Lord has made clean what was unclean. Peter didn’t decide to take it upon himself to do anything. The Lord brought about the change of heart using the combination of Peter’s vision, Peter’s words, Cornelius’ vision, the community actions and hospitality through the Holy Spirit to lead to a change of heart. With the Holy Spirit at work, Peter could only say, “Who was I that I could hinder God?”

Indeed, who can hinder God? Why would we try? Peter might have tried to hinder God had he not first recognized the Holy Spirit at work. That’s the trick isn’t it. Recognizing the Holy Spirit at work. Changing one’s mind, noticing something new, shifting perspective – is hard. We’re busy, we’re sure of things, we have good hearts, we never sit still – how can we hear God when the world goes by so quickly. God is always doing a new thing. It is very hard to see that if we are only looking for things that need improvement. Sometimes the new thing God is doing isn’t because something is broken, but because it could be bigger, more expansive, more inclusive, more loving, more Godly.

When the gospel of John tells us that “God so loved the world….” I think what he was saying was, “all” means “all.”

Let’s pray,

1<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-111-18-6> WP, Karl Kuhn

2<https://mlp.org/our-story/>

3Skinner, Matthew, Acts, 2025