

# Who am I to Hinder God?

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I suppose the Spirit had to come at Peter sideways. He was so headstrong. He had a right to be. Who would know better than Peter what Jesus would do? He walked, ate and slept beside our Jesus for three years. Peter saw him teach, heal, serve, die and rise again.

It's a good thing the Spirit snuck up on Peter. He knew too much. He knew the laws. He knew what he could eat. He knew with whom he could eat.

But Peter had a weak spot. His hunger. Leave it to the Spirit to sneak up on our weak side. Nothing is as important even today in Middle Eastern cultures than what you eat and with whom you eat.

John Holbert, a Bible scholar who preached here in Lincoln, writes in as sermon that we cannot “overemphasize the radical, earth-shaking claim that Peter's experience represents. If God's spirit is as available to Gentiles as it has been to Jews, the world is a vastly different place.

That's why the leaders in Jerusalem called Peter on the carpet:  
<sup>3</sup>“So you've been visiting Gentiles and eating with them, have you?”  
Jerusalem leaders asked.

The Spirit--and I am sure of this--sneaks up on us more than we realize.

It's a good thing all this happened to Peter first. Had it been touchy-feely John, or Mary Magdalene Jerusalem leaders could have ignored this groundbreaking, unthinkable action. Listen to Peter “splain” himself:

<sup>4</sup>Peter then explained the whole event to them step by step from the beginning:

<sup>5</sup>“One day when I was in the town of Joppa, I fell into a trance while at prayer and had a vision of something like a big sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners.

... <sup>6</sup>I watched intently and saw in it all sorts of animals and wild beasts— everything possible that could walk, crawl or fly. <sup>7</sup>Then I heard a voice that said to me, Now, Peter, make your sacrifice and eat.’

<sup>8</sup>I replied, ‘Oh no, I can't, my God. Nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth!’ <sup>9</sup>And a second time the voice spoke from heaven,

**‘Don't call unclean what God has made clean.’**

<sup>11</sup>“Just at that moment, three men stopped outside the house where we were staying; they had been sent ... to fetch me... and when we entered Cornelius' house,

<sup>15</sup>“I had hardly begun to speak when the Holy Spirit came down on them in the same way as on us in the beginning, ...”

<sup>17</sup>I realized then that God was giving them the same gift that had been given to us when we came to believe in our Savior Jesus Christ. So I said ‘Who am I to hinder God?’ ”

<sup>28</sup> When they heard this they were silenced.

*Note:* Peter had to learn this lesson over and over again. Acts Chapter 15 has him as one of the “brethren” who called Paul on the carpet when Paul baptized non-Jews into the Christian faith. That is our story for next week.

This is huge. Huge leaps forward don’t come easy. Even if the Spirit is nudging, pushing, and dragging us. I remember how my father taught me to get a pickup out of a rut. What a breakthrough! “Rock it back and forth.” Really? Yes! Full speed ahead and you spin. Sit there and you stay stuck. Go forward, let off the gas, roll back... The Spirit is always rocking us out of the ruts we get stuck in. What do you need to leave behind? Rock on it a little!

Remember “Footprints?” In the original poster version the writer is grateful to the Spirit for walking right beside her/him and says, “Looking back over my life I see there were times with only one set of footprints and those were my hardest times. Why did you leave me?” The Voice responds, “I didn't leave you. Those were the times I carried you.”

ALTERNATE ENDING: I say, “Looking back over my life I see the times there where only one set of footprints and they were the hardest times for me. Why did you leave me?”

And the Voice says, “Look again my child! Those are MY footprints. See those two ditches right beside my footprints? That's where I dragged you kicking and screaming into the future!”

In the Middle East table sharing indicates who is in the clan and who is not. One of the main reasons religious leaders opposed Jesus was his choice of table companions; he ate with too many sinners for their tastes, making himself unclean in the eyes of those who determine such things.<sup>1</sup>

So, to put an end to that sort of thinking, Peter is given a dream. All sorts of creepy, crawly critters wriggle around on a giant sheet, falling from heaven.

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God clearly has in mind a reordering of the world as Peter knew it. And, just as clearly, God has in mind a reordering of the world as we know it.

**Dr. Holbert and others say Acts 10-11 is the heart of the faith:**

**“Why can we not hear this amazing story? Why does it not inform daily our relationships with other religions, with people who we think are not like us?”**

*Holbert:* “God does not judge by appearance. When we deny the table to persons who are gay, we give the lie to this truth. When we refuse to allow gay persons to marry, we give the lie to this truth. Whenever we exclude anyone on the basis of ‘appearance,’ *i.e.* persons different in any way from us, we give the lie to this truth.”

Jesus put this principle of the faith in positive terms. Disciples arguing who is greatest stop someone not following them who is healing in Jesus’ name:

<sup>50</sup> **Jesus replied, “...anyone who is not against you is for you.”**

Holbert: “When we decide that our way is the only way, we laugh in the face of the Holy Spirit who is forever blowing its own way, reordering our disordered world. **‘Who are we to hinder God?’** Who indeed?”

The Spirit is still at it, nudging us, pushing us to cross other frontiers. Overcoming bullying offers us huge potential for our own spiritual growth.

Focusing on bullying helps us see all kinds of ways we try to impose our reality on others. Learning that in some ways we we all bully, and developing way to stop bullying in process will make us a better church and better people.

Dealing with pervasive hunger will transform us, too. It’s a systemic problem, and it’s a personal problem. People next door or down the street are hungry. Coming to grips with this will make us aware of how unaware we are of the assumptions we have that are classist and racist.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Redefinition-World-John-Holbert-04-22-2013.html>

Hunger issues take us right back to the place Peter was. He was hungry when he had his vision. Hunger is both literal and a metaphor! We are hungry, too.

This week notice when the Spirit sneaks up on you. Notice your hunger.

Every time the Spirit sneaks up me, I want to say, **“Who am I to hinder God?”**

Chuck Curry, pastor of University Park-Sunnyside United Methodist Church in Portland, links the Spirit’s nudges, pushes, and sneaky moves with the hymn *God’s Eye is on the Sparrow*: “Our God is a God who watches over the powerless and keeps the powerful in check. There are no strangers in God’s house. We are all known and loved.”

As Peter said: **“Who am I to hinder God?”**

#### FIRST SCRIPTURE ACTS 11:1-17

The apostles and the community in Judea heard that Gentiles, too, had accepted the word of God. <sup>2</sup> As a result, when Peter went up to Jerusalem,

some of the Jewish believers took issue with him.

<sup>3</sup> “So you have been visiting the Gentiles and eating with them, have you?” they said.

<sup>4</sup> Peter then explained the whole affair to them step by step from the beginning:

<sup>5</sup> “One day when I was in the town of Joppa, I fell into a trance while at prayer and had a vision of something like a big sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners.

This sheet came quite close to me. <sup>6</sup> I watched intently and saw in it all sorts of animals and wild beasts— everything possible that could walk, crawl or fly.

<sup>7</sup> Then I heard a voice that said to me,

‘Now, Peter, make your sacrifice and eat.’

<sup>8</sup> I replied, ‘I can’t, my God. Nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth!’ <sup>9</sup> And a second time the voice spoke from heaven, ‘Don’t call profane what God has made clean.’

<sup>10</sup> This happened three times, then the sheet and what was in it was drawn up to heaven again. <sup>11</sup> “Just at that moment, three couriers stopped outside the house where we were staying; they had been sent from Caesarea to fetch me,

<sup>12</sup> and the Spirit told me to have no hesitation about returning with them.

These six believers came with me as well, and we entered Cornelius’ house.

<sup>13</sup> He told us he had seen an angel standing in the house who had said, ‘Send messengers to Joppa and bring back Simon, known as Peter;

<sup>14</sup> he has a message for you that will save you and your entire

household.’ <sup>15</sup> “I had hardly begun to speak when the Holy Spirit came down on ~~them~~ the same way as on us in the beginning, <sup>16</sup> and I remembered what he had said:

‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’

<sup>17</sup> I realized then that God was giving them the same gift that had been given to us when we came to believe in our Savior Jesus Christ. Who am I to hinder God?”

#### GALATIANS 3:23-28

<sup>23</sup> Before faith came, we were under the constraint of the Law, locked in until the faith that was coming would be revealed.

<sup>24</sup> In other words, the Law was our monitor until Christ came to bring about our justification through faith.

<sup>25</sup> But now that faith is here, we are no longer in the monitor’s charge.

<sup>26</sup> Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus.

<sup>27</sup> All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

<sup>28</sup> In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus.

#### GOSPEL SCRIPTURE LUKE 9:46-50 *Inclusive Language Translation*

A dispute arose among the disciples as to which of them was the greatest.

<sup>47</sup> Jesus, who knew their thoughts, took a little child and had it stand next to him.

<sup>48</sup> Then he said to them, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me.

And anyone who welcomes me, welcomes the One who sent me.

For the lowliest among you is the greatest.”

<sup>49</sup> John said, “Rabbi, we saw someone casting out devils in  
your name,  
and—because the individual doesn’t follow along with us—  
we tried to put a halt to it.”

<sup>50</sup> Jesus replied, “Don’t stop it, for anyone who is not against  
you is for you.”