

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
Easter 5 (C) ~ May 18, 2025  
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda  
Acts 11:1-18  
Psalm 148:1-6, 11-14  
John 13:31-35

*Let us pray:*

May [we] live this day  
Compassionate of heart,  
Clear in word,  
Gracious in awareness,  
Courageous in thought,  
Generous in love.<sup>1</sup>

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, *Amen*.

“Who am I, to hinder God?”

In the early days after the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus, those who loved and knew Him best in this life were left to figure out how in the world to keep the movement going without Him. Jesus had promised that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, would come to guide and inspire and empower them to continue the work of the Gospel, but without Jesus physically present – coaching and instructing and often prodding them every step of the way – sometimes those next steps were not clear.

We might imagine His followers asking the same question on the lips of many here at St. Dunstan's: “What NOW?!”

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<sup>1</sup> John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008)

The Acts of the Apostles, the “history book” of Christian Scripture, begins with the stories of Peter and the others commissioned by Jesus to go out and spread the Good News.

They are very much building the plane as they fly it. Even with the Spirit’s guidance, they are not sure how to proceed:

Who should be included in their fellowship? How do they know who “belongs” and who does not?

That is the problem Peter faces in this morning’s reading.

Today we hear Peter share with the “circumcised believers” in Jerusalem (in other words, the “in crowd”) his strange dream – his mystical vision – telling him to expand the mission to Gentiles, to non-Jews, and to declare all things clean, which is to say, kosher.

In other words, to expand the boundaries of who is included and who is not.

This is, of course, a radical re-vision, a dramatic change in understanding of the faith.

It suggests that God truly is about to do a “new thing” – heretofore unheard of and unexpected. Not the way we’ve always done it.

Perish the thought.

In our own time, we might remember that it hasn’t been all that long, in the larger context of history, since women and those in the LGBTQIA+ community were not allowed to be ordained in the Episcopal Church – or, in some cases, to hold leadership positions in the Church at all.

God is working in other new ways, in the Church and outside it, now.

In the face of questioning from the old guard who have been there from the beginning, Peter defends his actions with the rhetorical question,

“Who am I, to hinder God?”

From the Greek: Who am I to prevent, forbid, or *deny*?<sup>2</sup>

Hmmm...

Isn't it interesting that this new, expanded vision of God's mission is reported and mediated through Peter, who is, it must be said, a bit of an unreliable narrator.

Peter, who wanted to walk on the water to Jesus, but who began to sink as soon as he recognized the danger.

Peter, who wanted to stay on the mountain of the Transfiguration, basking in Jesus' glory.

Peter, who could not wrap his mind around Jesus' impending suffering.

Peter, who denied knowing his friend Jesus not once, not twice, but three times.

*Who am I, to hinder God?*

Peter knows quite a lot about hindering God.

It's never really a given that he will “do the right thing.”

In his humanity, Peter has demonstrated – over and over again – his capacity to be a stumbling block.

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<sup>2</sup>

[https://www.biblestudytools.com/nas/passage/?q=luke+9:49;luke+9:50;luke+11:52;luke+18:16;luke+23:2,](https://www.biblestudytools.com/nas/passage/?q=luke+9:49;luke+9:50;luke+11:52;luke+18:16;luke+23:2)

More than once Peter's doubts and fears have gotten in the way of – or at least slowed down – the mission of God.

Maybe his question is meant to be tongue-in-cheek, to be ironic – as in, “Dude, far be it from *me* to block what God wants to do!”

Or maybe it is confessional: “I am a worm and no man” (Psalm 22:6) – I am not worthy. When compared with the Almighty, I am nothing.

Or maybe both are true: Peter acknowledges his lowliness *and* recognizes the ways in which he has been an obstacle to God.

No matter the intended tone, the question hangs in the air for all of us this morning:

“Who am I, and who are each of you, to hinder God?”

Well... We are beloved children of God, created in God's own image and precious in God's sight – blessed with the gift of free will, the *power* to align ourselves with God...or not.

That identity is central to our faith.

And...At the heart of Christianity lies the mystery of Jesus, at once fully human *and* fully divine, embodying (literally) the partnership between God and humankind.

From the moment Mary uttered those world- and history-altering words, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), she embarked on a mission of *co-creation* – enabling God, working in her, to do infinitely more than she could ask or imagine.

So it is with us. God invites – God does not force or cajole – you and me to align ourselves with God's purposes here on earth. We always have the right to say “no.”

We can *choose* to hinder God. That is always on the table. God loves us enough to risk us walking away, or turning our backs, or outright blocking the road to God's hopes for us and for all of Creation. We do it all the time – intentionally, or not. Like Peter, our very human, very understandable doubts and fears can prevent us from co-creating, from co-operating with the new, heretofore unimaginable thing that God is about to do.

But how do we know when we are hindering God? What does that look like, in practice?

As we heard in this morning's Gospel, Jesus is clear that God's mission is all about love. Jesus gives the new commandment, the *mandatum* (from which we get "Maundy Thursday"):

That we love one another as He has loved us.

The love that Jesus commands is not a sentimental, mushy, "feel good" kind of love. It's not Hallmark.

The love that Jesus commands, embodies, and expects of His followers – *agápē* – is far deeper and more expansive than that.

*Agápē* is the love that God has for us, full of forgiveness, mercy, and grace. It is the love of second chances. It seeks to make our lives bigger, more abundant, aligned with God. *Agápē* is not contingent on behavior – more likely, it is poured out *despite* our behavior.

CS Lewis described *agápē* as "Divine Gift-love," the love that enables us "to love what is not naturally lovable; lepers, criminals, enemies, morons, the sulky, the superior, and the sneering."<sup>3</sup>

*Agápē* is not reserved for those who do everything right: On the contrary: It is showered *without* reservation on those who so often get things *wrong*...

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<sup>3</sup> CS Lewis, *The Four Loves* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), p. 177.

Those who put themselves first...

Those who repay evil for evil...

Those who struggle to trust – one another, and God...

Those who judge, who declare boundaries and divisions where God sees none.

*Agápē* is the love Jesus shows Peter – and, *I* believe, Judas. It is the love that God pours out on the very ones who, from time to time, have been known to hinder God.

*Agápē* is the love Jesus shows you and me.

You may have seen the bumper sticker that reads, “Jesus loves you – but I’m His favorite!”

It’s funny, precisely because it names a truth about us humans – including those of us trying, to the best of our limited ability, to follow Jesus and to cooperate with God’s will for our lives. We may believe that God does love everybody – regardless of religion, gender identity, orientation, class, race, ability, or political affiliation – AND, if we’re being honest, we also may secretly believe that we are just a little bit more special, more beloved, in God’s sight.

We may think we know who God loves and who God does *not*.

That belief hinders God’s work in the world. It slows it down. It pushes the coming Kingdom just a little bit further out toward the horizon.

We also limit God when we obstinately cling to our insistence that we know what is possible and what is not; what God can do and what God cannot; what God will do and what God will not.

We block the overflowing, abundant, expansive love of God when we become so attached to particular outcomes that we can imagine or allow no other possibility.

We’ve got it all figured out.

And...We thwart God's purposes when we squander the amazing, bountiful gifts and talents God has bestowed on each of us uniquely – when we fail to see ourselves as beloved children of God, precious in God's sight. We choose not to allow God to work through us.

That, quite frankly, is tragic.

Friends, who am I to hinder God? Who are you? We are all imperfect, doubt- and fear-ridden people who, like Peter, so often want to do the right thing but misstep, nonetheless. We sin. We “miss the mark.”

And just as He does for Peter, Jesus showers each of us with the *agápē* love of forgiveness and mercy and grace. Jesus loves and believes in us enough to give us second – and third, fourth, fifth, on into infinity – chances to align ourselves with God's purposes for us and for all of Creation.

So that we, too, might one day say, “Who *am* I to hinder God?” and mean it – without a trace of irony.

There is hope for all of us yet.

May it be so.

*Amen.*