

On God's Side or in God's Way?

Acts 11:1-18

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on April 24, 2016]

I

The other night I re-watched the 2012 Academy Award winning Steven Spielberg movie "Lincoln," so I'd like to begin today with an anecdote from the life of our sixteenth president.

The story is told that in the midst of the Civil War a certain pious minister said to President Lincoln,
"I hope the Lord is on our side."

The president responded,
"I am not at all concerned about that . . . But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."

II

In our lesson today from the book of Acts, the early disciples of Jesus are confronted with the choice of being on God's side or in God's way.

Up to this point, the majority of the members of the early Christian community had been Jewish—

no surprise there, since Jesus was himself Jewish
and ministered primarily to the Jewish people.

One of the realities of life in the Roman world during the first century was the vast array of religious beliefs, practices, and observances.

The only way the Jewish faith could survive in such a world was by clinging to its exclusivity.

Jews viewed themselves as a holy people set apart by God.

Jewish study of the Torah,
observance of the Shabbat (Sabbath),
and practice of circumcision
allowed them to maintain their unique identity
as the people of Yahweh.

And yet this focus on Jewish exclusivity meant that even those Jews who had become Christians still clung to the belief that Gentiles were in some way unclean—
unfit to belong to the body of Christ without jumping through a number of hoops,
including converting to Judaism
and, for men, submitting to the rite of circumcision.

This is the way things are through the first nine chapters of the Book of Acts—
as most Followers of The Way—
as early Christians were known—
were Jews who had accepted Jesus as their Messiah.

The few exceptions to this were Gentiles, who came into the church as proselytes who had first converted to Judaism,
then confessed faith in Jesus and joined the Christian community.

But then something quite disconcerting occurred.

Word was spreading throughout the community that Gentiles were being accepted into the Faith.

It was being whispered that even the Apostle Peter,
the most influential of the apostles,
was part of this movement.

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, those Christians who prided themselves on their Jewish background criticized him for not upholding the traditional belief about sharing table fellowship with Gentiles.

For it was rumored that he not only entered the house of an uncircumcised Gentile, but had actually eaten with him.

“Tell us, Peter,” they demand.

“Say it ain’t so!”

But it was so.

III

So, starting from the beginning, Peter explains how he had come to this place of not only breaking bread with,
but also baptizing and welcoming Cornelius,
a high-ranking Roman army officer,
and his family into the faith of Jesus.

Peter recounts the whole story and then concludes:

“If God gave them the same gift [of the Spirit] . . . who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

Luke concludes the story this way:

“Hearing it all laid out like that, they quieted down. And then, as it sank in, they started praising God. ‘It’s really happened! God has broken through to the other nations, opened them up to Life!’” (The Message)

Luke considers this event so important that he tells the complete story in chapter 10—the longest single narrative in the Book of Acts.

Then, as if to put an exclamation point on it, has Peter retell the whole story in chapter 11.

If not for this event, we who come from a non-Jewish background might not be part of Christ's church today.

"Who was I," said Peter, "to think that I could stand in God's way?"

Peter came to understand what we sometimes have trouble grasping—
that it was God's will to throw open the doors of the church to all who
would be saved,
including Gentiles.

Even though it went against everything he had ever been taught or believed,
Peter wasn't going to oppose God
or, in his words,
"stand in God's way."

Down through the years there have been many examples of the church standing in
God's way.

The Italian astronomer Galileo championed the views of Copernicus of a
heliocentric solar system. Galileo was investigated by the Inquisition, found
guilty of heresy, forced to recant, and spent the rest of his life under house
arrest.

Martin Luther challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church when
he nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the parish church in Wittenberg. He
too was accused of heresy. But unlike Galileo, Luther refused to recant
saying, "Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me." He was
excommunicated for daring to question the practices of a corrupt church.

Anne Hutchinson gathered a Bible study group of over 60 people, both men
and women. She was banished from the colony of Massachusetts because

the authorities, all men, said women were not permitted to teach the Bible or express thoughts independently of their husbands.

Fifty-three years ago this month another Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Jr., was thrown into jail in Birmingham, Alabama. In response to the moderation counseled by a group of white clergymen, King penned the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, one of the truly great documents of American history.

Why do some religious people have such an affinity for the status quo?

Why do we have such a fear of change?

Are we truly on God's side?

Or are we just getting in God's way?

IV

Now to be sure, the church has been at the forefront of many of the positive changes that have occurred in our world.

However, I can't think of any significant progress that has taken place in human society that some religious group or another hasn't opposed.

Two hundred and thirty-six ago, in Gloucester, England, a newspaper publisher named Robert Raikes started a movement which was to have a far-reaching impact on the moral and religious life of the Western world.

Robert Raikes began the Sunday School movement.

In July 1780 he recruited four women who gathered a group of children—
 first boys, then later girls,
 for instruction in reading, the Bible, and the church catechism.

They met on Sundays because the boys all worked in factories Monday-Saturday.

Believe it or not, the Sunday School movement was strongly resisted by the established church.

The schools were derisively called "*Raikes' Ragged School*,"

The fear was that such a program would lead to popular education which in turn would lead to revolution.

And then there was a legalistic wing of the church that believed that the Sabbath day was for worship and rest only,
not for recreation or for school—
not even Sunday School where the Bible was taught.

One Scottish preacher feared that Sunday Schools would “destroy all family religion.”

Imagine that: sending children to Sunday School would destroy family religion.

Despite the opposition, the movement spread, and by 1831 Sunday schools in Great Britain were teaching 1.5 million children every week,
approximately 25 percent of the population.

The Sunday Schools of Robert Raikes became the forerunners of the modern English school system.

Every progressive step that has ever been taken in human society has first of all been opposed by somebody in the name of Christ.

During the early days of the Salvation Army, General William Booth and his associates were bitterly attacked in the press by certain religious leaders.

Can you imagine religious people opposing a group that has no other reason for existence except to help the down and out?

When his son Bramwell showed General Booth a newspaper containing an attack on the Salvation Army, the General replied,

“Bramwell, fifty years hence it will matter very little indeed how these people treated us; it will matter a great deal how we dealt with the work of God.”

Like General Booth, Peter was finally able to see the big picture—
that God was opening a door to Gentile salvation that had previously been shut tighter than a drum.

Are we able to see the big picture?

Or will we continue to cling to the narrow, dogmatic view about certain people and groups that we were taught as children?

V

Behind the story of Peter’s visit to Cornelius is the message of what God had been trying to say all along—

God’s call to Abraham, that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed;

Solomon’s prayer that the Temple would be a place of prayer for all peoples;

Isaiah’s vision that all nations shall come streaming to the house of the Lord;

Jonah’s preaching mission to Nineveh;

Jesus’ sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth that highlighted two non-Jewish recipients of God’s grace:

the widow of Zarephath, whose son was raised to life by Elijah,
and the Syrian general Naaman, who was healed of leprosy.

So when the first church council convenes in Jerusalem to hear Peter’s defense,

this is not a disconnected event,
 but an event built upon a message embedded
 in the heart of God from eternity.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians there is a play on words that illuminates God's purpose.

In Ephesians 1:14-15, Paul says God is the *pater* of every *patria*—
 the "father (*pater*) from whom every family (*patria*) derives its name."

Can we grasp the radical implications of that?

God is not the God of Jews alone,
 or the God only of Christians,
 but rather the "father of all fatherhood,"
 the "father of every family,"
 or the "father of the whole human family."

God is the God of Muslims and Buddhists and Sikhs...
 and even those who profess no belief in a deity.

Conversely, just as God is every person's Father,
 so every human being is God's child,
 and we are brother and sister to each other.

To those who divide people according to ethnicity, economic class, race, or gender,
 Paul writes in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ

*"there is neither Jew or Greek,
 slave or free,
 male and female."*

To those who limit God's lavish love to the morally upright, Matthew says that
 God *"makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous
 and the unrighteous"* (5:45).

Whether gay or straight,
 Republican or Democrat,
 Christian or Pagan,
 billionaire developer whom you envy,

or beggar on the street who repulses you,
Paul quotes a pagan poet to affirm that we are all God's "offspring" (Acts 17:28).

VI

This was the message of a state legislator in Georgia named Donald Ponder, who decided he could no longer stand in God's way.

He stood in the well of the House of Representatives and implored his colleagues to pass a bill that would impose extra penalties for hate crimes committed against ethnic and racial minorities, as well as against gay and lesbian people.

He confessed to the legislators that he had 9 great-great-great grandfathers who fought on the side of the Confederacy in the Civil War, and that several of those ancestors owned slaves.

He told his fellow legislators how he was president of his all-white college fraternity at Auburn University, and out of over 100 members, 6 of those were now openly gay. "But," he said, "the 'lasting bond of brotherhood' that we pledged ourselves to during those idealistic days apparently doesn't apply if you should later come out and declare yourself gay."

He told of his nanny, an African-American woman named Mary Ward, who had raised him from birth, who had taught him more than anyone else the difference between right and wrong.

He told of how one day when he was 12 or 13 and about to leave for school, she had leaned over to give him a kiss on the cheek, and how for some reason he turned his head. She stopped and looked at him and said, "You didn't kiss me because I'm black." He denied it, made some lame excuse. But he knew she was right and the memory of it had burned within him ever since.

Then Representative Donald Ponder spoke these unforgettable words:

"I have lived with the shame and memory of my betrayal of Mary Ward's love for me. I pledged to myself then and I re-pledged to myself the day I

buried her that never, ever again would I look in the mirror and know that I had kept silent, and let hate or prejudice or indifference negatively impact a person's life. Even if I didn't know them.

“Hate is all around us. It takes shape and form in ways that are somehow so small that we don't even recognize them to begin with, until they somehow become acceptable to us. It is up to us, as parents and leaders in our communities, to take a stand and to say loudly and clearly that this is just not acceptable.

“I believe that we must send a message to people that are filled with hate in this world, that Georgia has no room for hatred within its borders. It is a message that we can send to the people of this state, but it is also a message that you have to send to yourself. I ask you to look within yourself and do what you think is right. I ask you to vote YES on this bill and NO to hate.”

And you know what? They passed the bill!

VII

So today I ask you, if you dare, to take your most deeply held religious beliefs,
your most cherished religious scruples,
and do some Bible reading.

Read...What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean.

Read...I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Read Romans 14:20...Do not, for the sake of [religious scruples] destroy the work of God.

Read Ephesians 2:14...For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

And read Galatians 3:28...There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Describe to God in minute detail your hang-ups about certain groups.

List every stereotype you have ever heard about the group you don't like.

Read the Scripture and tell God how you really feel about...

Muslims or Democrats,
 gays or Catholics,
 African-Americans or Tea Partiers,
 skinny people or rich people.

Do it three times.

You will get bored with your own angry bitterness.

And then, just like Peter,
 on the third time,

maybe, just maybe,
 the healing light of God's grace will dawn on our cold gray hearts,
**and we will exchange our outmoded, inadequate belief
 for the grace of a God
 who accepts everyone
 in any nation
 who fears God
 and does what is right.**

Amen.

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