

STANDING IN GOD'S WAY

Sermon, May 19, 2019

Text: Acts 11:1-18

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

Acts 11:17b (NIV, c. 2011)

"Who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" Peter asks in today's reading from Acts. I think Peter learned his lesson early on in his years of discipleship. You may remember, along with Peter, this little story: Right after Simon made the great confession that earned him the name "Peter" from Jesus ... *"You are the Christ, the son of the living God" ...* Jesus started talking about how His path of faithfulness will involve suffering and rejection and even death. We are told that Peter took Jesus aside and even began to rebuke Him, saying, *"No Lord, this'll never happen to you."* Jesus turned and said, *"Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God."* Personally, I don't think Jesus was actually calling Peter the devil. Rather, I think He was saying in so many words, *"You know, Peter, you're out of line! You sound a lot like that fellow I spent forty days in the wilderness with, the one who was trying to tempt me to take the easy path, trying to get me to make moral compromises, trying to get me to use devilish means to achieve divine ends."* I think Jesus was basically saying, *"Get back in line: because you are out of line! You are getting in My way. Get out of My way, get behind Me, get in line behind Me, and follow."* Peter, along with anyone who would be Jesus' disciple, was being told to *get in line* and follow Jesus. Now in English one can read a bit of nuance in this phrase depending on where the emphasis is placed ... in short, don't stand IN Jesus' way and thus potentially be an obstacle to His gracious work, get in line and stand in JESUS' way, standing for what He would have you stand for, following Him in His way.

By the way, I can imagine Peter having a post-resurrection conversation with Jesus saying, *"Lord, I'm sure glad you didn't listen to ME!"*

In today's Scripture reading, Peter was in trouble with his presbytery. The Christians back in Jerusalem were less than thrilled that Peter had been out there associating with and ministering among Gentiles. Good Jews just didn't DO that. When news got back to the church in Jerusalem about the events described in Acts 10 with all these Gentiles being converted, well, it set the place in turmoil. In Acts 11, Peter was summoned to appear in Jerusalem at what was to become the first ecumenical council of the church. Peter takes the stand, so to speak, and talks of the events that took place in Caesarea detailed in the previous chapter. Peter tells how he had received a troubling vision, a vision in which God commanded him to kill and eat animals prohibited by Jewish kosher law. The vision was sort of like a heavenly pot luck supper just laid out before him, lowered on a tablecloth from heaven, with all kinds of strange potential un-kosher dishes ... and he is told to eat. Three times he received this same vision.

We read that this vision was the prelude to Peter being called to the town of Caesarea to preach to Cornelius, a centurion of the Roman army. In that vision, Peter was told three times in no uncertain terms, *"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean (or, God has cleansed)."* *(Just as a bit of an aside, the opposite can be implied as well ... "Don't call anything pure that God has called impure", but that's another sermon.)* The vision leaves Peter puzzled and confused, until suddenly three men arrive asking for him, and as Peter recounts, the Spirit told him to go with these men without hesitation. Peter went, taking six others with him, and they go to this centurion's house (so we have a traveling group of at least ten men). When they arrive at the home of Cornelius, we are told that this battle hardened soldier falls at Peter's feet; apparently a bit rattled by this act of reverence and obeisance, Peter says *"C'mon, get up, I'm just a man."*

This centurion is Cornelius, an officer in the occupying Roman army. We are also told there was a large group of people with Cornelius in that house, including many of his relatives and close friends. Not only was Cornelius a Gentile, he was an officer of the hated, occupying Romans. However, Acts 10 introduces this particular Roman as a man who feared God, as a man who gave generously to the poor, and as a man who prayed regularly. It is important to note Cornelius did not believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior not yet, anyway. This man didn't come to church very often. In fact, he never came to church at all. But the author of Acts makes a point of telling us that Cornelius' sincere prayers have been heard by God. As I've pointed out before when we've looked at this passage *(I think in 2010 ... if you remember, I'm flattered)*, this raises an interesting question. Does God hear the sincere prayers of those who aren't Christian? Apparently, He does. Of course!

How could He be God and not hear everything? The Bible tells us that God not only heard Cornelius' prayer, God even sends Cornelius an angel, which means this non-Christian outsider to the church has just received a unique, rare, personal ministry from God.

Another point I always like to make when reading this passage: The Bible does *not* say Peter brought God to Cornelius. God found Cornelius all by Himself, thank you. If God is indeed God, then it stands to reason He is alive and active throughout His entire creation. God had long been at work in Cornelius' world. What Cornelius desperately needed, though, was someone to help him understand the God who was already very alive and present and active in his life. Cornelius needed what so many of our neighbors and friends need ... he needed a faithful witness who could help explain and help him understand the very real presence and activity of God for him. In a nutshell, that is the work of Christian mission, home and abroad. Cornelius needed someone to help him better understand the God who was ALREADY THERE. So, the angel told Cornelius to send for Peter.

Sometimes we Peters in the church lack confidence; we have our doubts about whether our beliefs will resonate in the world beyond these walls. Be assured Jesus Christ is just as real and alive and active out there as He is in here! God is very much at work in all of this world. "For God so loved the world, that He sent His Son ..." God loves the world, and everyone in this world ... *everyone* ... sees the handiwork of, as the late Francis Schaeffer expressed it, "the God who is there." Many don't understand what they see, they don't understand the very real, vital presence and activity of the God they are witnessing, they don't understand the God who is there, they don't understand the workings of divine grace that keep intersecting their lives. They need faithful Peters who will enter their worlds, speak their language, know their concerns, and interpret for them just how the living Jesus Christ is at work *right there* where they live and work. They *need us*, they need you, to be faithful and true witnesses of Jesus Christ.

So, as the story is told in Acts 10, God sends the angel, who tells Cornelius to go find the apostle Peter, who is staying with Simon the Tanner at his beach home in Joppa. Cornelius dispatches three men and thus Peter was called "to the stand" to speak as a faithful witness to and for Jesus Christ. Peter arrives in Caesarea at Cornelius' home with his traveling party of ten, and there a large crowd had gathered, and in a passage we read Easter Sunday (Acts 10), Peter said, *"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, Who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with Him. We are witnesses of everything He did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed Him by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him from the dead on the third day and caused Him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen — by us who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about Him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."* We are told that "... while Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message."

And right there and then, the Gentile branch of the church is born, in much the same way the Jewish church had been birthed on the Day of Pentecost by the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter concludes, *"So if God gave them the same gift He gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"* Peter had a choice. He could either choose to stand **IN** God's way, or he could choose to stand in **GOD'S** way. Again, notice the two nuances: One is a nuance of obstacle, and the other a nuance of obedience. Well, Peter had learned this lesson a long time ago. Peter chooses to stand in God's way in the good sense. He chooses to not be an obstacle to God's grace, but a cooperative conduit of it, as he gets in line with the will of God in this matter. When Peter recounts the story to the church in Jerusalem, they also choose not to stand **IN** God's way. Like Peter, they chose to stand in **GOD'S** way, to embrace the truth that God is at work in Christ in the Gentiles just as much as in them.

This is a question we would do well to ask ourselves all the time. Am I standing **IN** God's way, or am I standing in **GOD'S** Way? We stand *in* God's way, we can get in God's way, when we insist on our own about what is right and what is wrong, when we make our own judgments about who is clean and who is unclean, rather than honoring God's clear directives. We stand in **GOD'S** way, in the good sense of that phrase, when we allow God to determine what and/or who is clean and unclean, right and wrong, and we get in line with His good and gracious will ... and make every effort to take our stands accordingly.