

High St Uniting Church Frankston

Could I hinder God?

Acts 10:34 - 48



The parable of the vine and the branches, the parable of the mustard seed, the encounter with the woman in Tyre, the encounter with the woman at the well in Samaria, the healing of the Centurion's servant, all of that teaching and all those acts of healing were not enough to break the boundary-making tendencies of the disciples. They were Jewish, the Jews were the people of God, and

the boundary was clear in their minds; you were circumcised, or you were uncircumcised, you were clean, or you were profane, you were in, or you were out. Jesus was Jewish, and no matter what he taught or did, God's grace was for the Jews. It was too much for the disciples to grasp the world changing nature of the Gospel, only God could do that, and the importance of God's action in breaking the Gospel out of Jerusalem and Judea is shown by the length and detail and repetition of this story of Peter and Cornelius. We have Cornelius' story, Peter's story, Peter and Cornelius telling each other their stories, and then Peter telling the story to the church in Jerusalem. One and a half chapters of God's actions to break old understandings and behaviours. Peter's vision, the experience of hearing Cornelius' story, and then the reality of the Spirit, all convinced Peter that this was God at work, and he had no place in reaching for old rules and laws and traditions to try to control what was happening. As he later tells the gathering of disciples at Jerusalem, "Who was I that I could I hinder God?" Even more than the idea of the disciples bearing fruit to share with the world, this was God recruiting people in the wider world to be bearers of fruit themselves.

Unfortunately, as important, and dramatic as this story was, the message didn't take. Paul had to fight to carry the Gospel to people in Asia Minor and Europe and persuade the church at Jerusalem to accept them without forcing them to become converts to Judaism. Even Peter didn't really get the message if we follow Paul's account of his behaviour in Galatia. The idea of boundaries, of determining who is in and who is out, who is acceptable and who isn't, runs deep in people. But more unfortunate than the Jewish church not accepting Gentiles is the tendency of the Gentile church, historically and even right up to today, to not learn the lesson of Peter and Cornelius and to go on to make boundaries in their cultures and societies and churches. Instead of learning the lesson that God's love in Jesus Christ is for all, we have taken the lesson as, "The Jews got it wrong, we have a right to share in God's grace, and the right to define who we are". The church, throughout history, has ignored Peter's warning words and gone on to hinder God in every generation. Drawing boundaries of race, class, theology, gender, sexuality, age, education, and ability. Not just because boundaries keep out people we are uncomfortable around, but because boundaries help us justify why we are in. We are smart enough, moral enough, have the right understanding, or the right upbringing, that is why God has blessed us. Just like the Jewish disciples in the Early Church, we don't like the wild, untamed, undefined, and unbounded nature of God's grace. In every generation, we have had people who only want God's grace to extend to people like them.

Even more than Pentecost, which is only a couple of weeks away, this story of the Holy Spirit is a declaration that this is God's way and will. To cross boundaries and borders, to ignore our plans and recipes for salvation. The Spirit falls on those relatives and friends of Cornelius while Peter was speaking, not after. Peter didn't have to say the right words, or follow the correct theology, so that the Spirit would come. The Spirit had already gone ahead of Peter to reach Cornelius in the first place; this was the Spirit's mission, not Peter's. Pentecost was telling the disciples at Jerusalem to go out into all the world. This story is reinforcing that the Spirit goes before and with them. Don't just go to Jews in other countries, cross boundaries, cross borders, include and involve all in the Gospel of grace.

This story says to every generation of the church in every culture, "Don't put boundaries around the grace of God and hinder the mission of reconciliation." Rather than sitting as a story of the Gospel breaking out of Jerusalem and Judea in the first century, this story demands that we check if we have and are creating boundaries. Where are we in danger of hindering God? When I was a young man, one of the leaders in the church, a great man of faith, declared that he would never walk into a hotel. And that is sad, because the Spirit is hovering in that hotel waiting for people of faith to come and share the love of God. We have experienced the painful conversations about ministry with, to, and from people with alternate expressions of sexuality and gender. People openly declaring that there will never be a same sex wedding in their church. And the Spirit grieves. And we are constantly reminded of our tendency to craft buildings, and programs, and liturgy shaped for able bodied people. And the Spirit cries out with the voices of the blind, the hands of the deaf, and the wheels of the lame.

Who are we that we could hinder God? We are products of culture in need of regeneration in the grace of God. We are people who need to look carefully and constantly for the boundaries we create. Boundaries of language. Boundaries of behaviour. Boundaries of thought and understanding. Instead, let's follow the wild, untamed, unboundaried Spirit of God.