

“Not Hindering God”
Rev. Tom Steffen
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The question “Who am I to hinder God?” from today’s reading from *The Book of Acts* has been echoing throughout these days of Easter. Perhaps, the large stone placed in front of Jesus’ tomb, placed there to be a hindrance, no doubt, is a vivid reminder of the desire to hinder God. And you may remember that on Easter Sunday the first reading was from Acts, chapter 10, which features Peter speaking boldly of the newness for which his Jewish friends should begin to prepare. Now, in today’s first reading (Acts 11:1-18), Peter is being quizzed by Jewish Christians in Jerusalem concerning his conduct and his sermon recorded in Acts 10. He reiterates some of the amazing things that have been happening. He reports on his vision concerning all sorts of “unclean animals” and the voice of the Spirit that instructs Peter to “no longer make a distinction” between clean and unclean. What he tells the people, by way of a defense, brings into focus the power of God’s purposes crashing against established religious and social protocols. Crashing up against? Yes, it is what is bound to happen whenever God, through us, makes something new. And Peter ends his defense with this rhetorical question: “Who am I to hinder God?” (verse 17), which was a polite way of saying: “I will no longer do it!”

Oh, he’s been busy trying not to hinder God. He’s been busy preaching the good news of Jesus; busy bringing at least one person (Tabitha) back to life. He’s been busy persuading other Jews that Jesus was, in fact, God’s servant and Messiah; and busy baptizing people who received the gift of Holy Spirit. But Peter isn’t the focus, nor was John or the other apostles who also were busy doing amazing things. Peter’s rhetorical question is really a statement: We should be helping God, who is helping us, spread the Good News of God’s love and hope. Peter is inviting the leaders in Jerusalem and us as well to participate in the flow of God’s grace, a flow and force that seeks to widen the circle of God’s embrace. And the goal? Full inclusion, a fully integrated reality with God as center and circumference. Because nothing, no one, and no thing, in St. Paul’s words, will finally be separated from God’s love revealed in Jesus.

But, there was resistance then, and there is resistance today, and you know that there is resistance to full inclusion even in our beloved denomination. Peter’s rhetorical question “Who am I to hinder God,” most likely came in response to the question: “Why are you taking matters into your own hands, Peter? Now see here: the scriptures have already spoken on who is chosen. Why on earth are you treating Gentiles as if God loves them in the same way God loves us? Who do you think you are, Peter, the Pope or something? And Peter at great risk of being dismissed, boldly declares that God, in Christ, is reaching out to include all who have been excluded and regarded as second-class by our religious degrees, tribal passions, and partisan stripes; we who follow Jesus are under a new commandment that violates earlier social arrangements.

James Russell Lowell, in a poem, put it this way in his great old hymn, that sadly didn’t make it in our hymnal: “Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide, in the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side.” Why? Later in another stanza of his poem,

Lowell writes, because “New occasions teach new duties, time makes even ancient good uncouth.”

Peter looked at his listeners that day and said: “We are “repenting! This is what we do this side of Easter.” To repent is to turn, to turn toward God’s love. To his listeners, to us here in this place, to the people called Methodist, to our nation and our world, Peter says “Won’t you turn? Oh, to do otherwise is to hinder God.” And when Peter finished speaking, everybody got really quiet.

Before I sit down, before we get really quiet and perhaps decide if we will continue to turn toward God’s newness at work in our midst, I want to read a few lines from a poem I found this week, written by Tonya Ingram, the first of many I hope to find and read in the future. It is entitled “Until the Stars Collapse.”

“Until the stars collapse you owe it to yourself to quit being the apology. You owe it to yourself to hold your hand and sing your favorite song. To love another and see how far that will go. To love yourself and forget where you were headed in the first place.

Love is a funny story. It wakes up and builds a plot. It wakes up and shapes you into the kind of woman your mother studies. I am not perfect in it. I am not even remotely articulate, but it is big, this love...

Come find me when the day is bronze and the sorrow is full. I am building my poem in this here heart. All of it is a working title.”

Tonya Ingram is the 2011 New York Knicks Poetry Slam champion, a member and co-founder of NYU's poetry slam team, a member of the 2011 Urban Word-NYC team, the 2013 Nuyorican Grand Slam team and the 2015 Da Poetry Lounge Slam team. She is a six-time poetry slam finalist, and a 2014 Pushcart Prize nominee. She is a New York University alumna, and a graduate from Otis College of Art & Design where she obtained her MFA in Public Practice.

James Russell Lowell wrote for the *Boston Courier* (in 1845), “Verses Suggested by the Present Crisis.” Lowell was a Harvard Law School graduate, a New England poet, and a passionate abolitionist.