

Standing in God's Way

Acts 11:1-18

Farmville Baptist Church

May 15, 2022

We are nine days away from the end of school – and I am excited, maybe even more excited than Jonathan! Why, you ask? Because Jonathan has been finishing the school year out in Appomattox, and since our move, we've had a 45-minute drive to get him to school each morning. I am ready to not have to get myself going, and help get Jonathan going, that early!

The morning commutes haven't been all bad, of course. Some mornings, Jonathan dozes back off to sleep and I listen to a podcast or audiobook while I sip coffee. Other mornings, we play a game Jonathan makes up, or take turns at 20 questions. On Friday, we did something a little

different; Jonathan asked to listen to the soundtrack to the Disney movie *Moana*. Who here has seen *Moana*? It's got a great soundtrack, and he wanted to listen to it, he said, for "inspiration" as he faced the day. After he got out of the car, I must confess, I just kept listening – like I said, it's really good. And as I listened, I thought back over the story of the movie.

It's a movie set on a Pacific island, where a young girl named Moana is growing up in a traditional village. Her father is the chief, and everyone expects her to follow in his footsteps. The people of the village live off the bounty of the island – coconuts and *taro* roots and fish from the lagoon – and their life is idyllic and safe. But Moana feels the pull of the sea, a desire to get out and go past the reef to where the ocean meets the sky. Her father forbids her, pointing out the dangers of the open water and reminding her of her

responsibilities. He implores her to be happy where she is, where they all are, and for a time she is, or at least tries to be. Moana accepts her duty as a leader of her people and appreciates the joys of her island home.

Then one day, something happens. The island is getting sick, the coconuts are rotting, the fishing boats bring no fish back to shore. A big change is happening, and the islanders cannot rest secure in their island anymore. The old ways aren't working. Yet they don't want to leave, they feel they cannot leave. And when Moana begs her father to let her go out and seek a solution, he refuses. She goes anyways – and not only learns the skills that would let her people travel from their island to a new one, she discovers how to heal the sickness threatening the island, the ocean, and the entire region. She returns to her home to a warm welcome. But she was only able to save her people and her island by

understanding that there are moments when things change – and in those moments of change, whether good or bad, the old boundaries and traditions don't always have the answer.

Given today's Scripture text, I think the apostle Peter would have understood Moana's story. When we meet Peter in the biblical story, he is a traditional Jewish man – a fisherman by trade, a small-town resident by geography, a faithful layperson in the synagogue by religious expression. He had a wife, presumably a family, a home, and a career, and in normal times, that would have likely been enough for him. But then, one day, a rabbi meets him and invites him to become his disciple. Peter jumps at the chance, we are told, but he still has the mindset, the worldview, the perspective he had before he ever met Jesus. It's Peter who thinks Jesus is going to start a revolution, after all, and Peter who tries to

protect his Master in the garden with a sword and a swing at a servant's ear.

And then, the resurrection happens. Easter Sunday comes. And Peter sees the empty tomb and starts to wonder. That wonder increases as he feels the fiery breath of the Spirit on Pentecost, that wonder takes hold as he experiences the Spirit's power in his own life – healing the sick, standing up to the authorities, even, as we heard last week, praying for God to raise the dead, and the dead coming to life! So when he's staying at Simon the tanner's house in Joppa and he gets a vision from God, Peter is used to the Spirit going in new directions.

Even still, this is a new direction that takes him a while to wrap his head around. He receives three visions of a sheet filled with animals that he's invited to "kill and eat." But these aren't the animals he usually eats; these are animals

the Torah specifies as ‘unclean,’ forbidden to eat. Faithful Jews of that day, like many faithful Jews before and since, abided by the dietary restrictions of the Torah with strict observance, because it was part of the identity they had and have as the covenant people of God. A faithful Jew, Peter also kept these restrictions, these kosher guidelines, and his initial response to the vision is, “No, Lord, I would never eat these animals. They are not allowed!” To which a voice from heaven responded, “Do not call anything impure that God has made.”

And then there was a knock at the door. Outside were men from Caesarea, a nearby garrison town of Roman troops. They brought a request from a Roman military officer there, Cornelius: would Peter please come with them? Cornelius was a spiritual man, you see, and he believed God was telling him to connect with Peter.

So Peter goes, along with some other Jewish Christians in Joppa, and visits with Cornelius. Peter realizes God's Spirit is at work in his life and in the lives of others in his household, so he baptizes Cornelius and his household and spends a few days with him.

Great story! Inspiring, even. And, surely, something to celebrate!

Yet when Peter gets back to Jerusalem, he hears the critics and the cynics starting to whisper and accuse. "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, 'You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.'"¹ Put another way, Jewish Christians in Jerusalem heard Peter, a Jewish Christian, stayed at the house of a Gentile, and they couldn't abide that. Why? Because another part of being a Jew, at

¹ Acts 11:2

least to many of the faithful of the day, was to stay set apart. That's why they ate kosher meals, and that's why they wouldn't spend any time in the home of Gentiles. God had given them a covenant identity, and to maintain that meant keeping separate from those who weren't part of the covenant people.

Peter himself ~~had~~ held that perspective before, maybe even as recently as a few days ago. Something has changed for Peter, however. His perspective has shifted. Something new is happening, and he is understanding that "something new" has big implications. But he also understands that the folks in the room – the disciples of Jesus who were already faithful Jews – hadn't experienced what he had experienced. So he began to tell them the story.

"Starting from the beginning," we are told, Peter related what had happened. There's something about a story, isn't

it? We can be firm in our convictions, set in our ways, but a good story can help us see things from another perspective, another point of view. It's usually not as good as experiencing it ourselves, but it's the next best thing. And that day in Jerusalem, the leaders of the nascent Jesus movement, firmly grounded in Jewish belief and identity, heard a different perspective. They heard of the vision of the wild animals and the creepy-crawlies let down from heaven, they heard of the angelic voice, they heard of the invitation to go from the seaport of Joppa to the Roman administrative city of Caesarea. And, this is key, they heard what happened as Peter was in Cornelius's house, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them *as he had come on us at the beginning.*”² Peter recognized that

² Acts 11:15, emphasis mine

these Gentiles had been given the same gift of the Spirit that he had received, that all of those Jewish Christians gathered in Jerusalem had received. The same gift – no difference.

And then he recalled one more thing: Jesus had said that the mark of his covenant was baptism with the Spirit of God.

“Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’”³

The Holy Spirit, the tangible, powerful presence of God with us, the Advocate that Jesus promised his closest friends, the power that swept through the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost. That’s the power that had driven the disciples into the street to proclaim the Gospel in every language under heaven. That’s the power that acted through Peter and John to heal the lame man, and that also steeled their hearts to stand up to the bullying of the Sanhedrin. That’s the

³ Acts 11:16

power that healed sick people simply touched by Peter's shadow. That's the power that fired the courage in Stephen's heart to bear witness to Jesus at the cost of his own life. And that's the power that had filled a different upper room in Joppa just days before, restoring the disciple Tabitha to life.

If anything was the mark of the presence of God in someone's life, if anything was the mark that they were part of what Jesus was doing in the world, if anything was the mark that someone should be considered an insider to the community of faith, it was this: that they were demonstrating the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's presence overwhelms the differences that would exclude and opens pathways of commonality that go beyond any human division. As Peter testified, the Gentiles with Cornelius ^{had} ~~had~~ received the Holy Spirit from God. "So," Peter says, "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?"⁴

Who, indeed. The people gathered around, presumably even Peter's critics in the room, heard the story and were convinced. We're told they raised no further objections and even that they lifted praises to God, since "even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."⁵

Of course, we know that not every Christian and not every church in the past 2000 years has learned the lesson of Peter and Cornelius. Soon enough, Peter and Paul and other missionaries would have to do some damage control in the churches they had started, because *some, not all but some of the* other Christians who were Jews like them had come through declaring that Gentiles, even though part of the community of faith, were somehow second-class and should convert to Judaism to

⁴ Acts 11:17

⁵ Acts 11:18

remain in the church. Other early Christian teachers and preachers tried to limit women in the church, or declared that the rich were somehow more in-tune with God's will and more worthy of honor and respect than the poor or enslaved in the congregation. Move forward into history, and we find the church involved in wars, crusades, inquisitions, and genocides, to say nothing of the drumbeat of antisemitism, feudalism, colonialism, and nationalism that ^{has} divided the world up into "us" and "them" in every age.

Closer to home, we find that the church in America has a spotty track record, even today. Churches have refused to serve communion, that most common of rituals of the Christian community, to those who happen to be members of other Christian churches. Entire swaths of American Christianity have taught, at least in the past and occasionally now, that Catholics are not Christian brothers and sisters.

The historic Southern Baptist Convention split over a host of theological concerns, prominent among them the idea that women were unable to be called by God to use their gifts in the service of the church, even when those gifts of the Spirit were evident to all. Race has been a fraught divider in our churches, with segregated congregations being the norm, at first by law, then by church policy, and now by long habit. Members of the LGBTQ community often find little welcome in churches, even churches they belonged to previous to their orientation becoming known. And, perhaps for the first time in my lifetime, many Christians are becoming antagonistic and unwelcoming to brothers and sisters in Christ whose politics don't line up exactly with theirs, even saying that someone of a different political persuasion cannot possibly be a follower of Jesus. We hold to the old tradition of

division, drawing lines and boundaries about who is in and who is out, and never the two shall meet.

Such an attitude is unworthy of the Gospel. Such a practice has no place in the church on this side of Easter. As Peter said all those years ago in Jerusalem, “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?”

Today, we find that the world is changing around us. Some of those changes excite us; others make us anxious. Yet in the midst of the changes, we find God’s Spirit is on the move, sometimes in new ways, and often among new people. And when that happens, we can choose to move with the Spirit, or we can find that the Spirit moves on because we have stood in its way.

A friend of mine tells the story of visiting a church in Dublin. Like in many places in Europe, this church had

declined quite a bit. Many young people in Ireland were like their contemporaries in other parts of the modern world: turned off by or even ignorant of the traditional church. This church used to be the center of the community; now, they were a small congregation in an old building across from a row of nightclubs. On Saturday nights, hundreds and hundreds of young people would crowd into the area – but none of them were coming back on Sunday morning. For many of them, the only thing that the church was good for was its front lawn, which was a convenient place to relieve themselves after a night of revelry.

Of course, the church was not thrilled with this development. Think about how we would feel if we had to deal with the refuse of hundreds of drunk college students on our front steps each Sunday! The church leadership and the deacons got together and started pondering what to do.

Eventually, they brought to the congregation a plan at their regular business meeting: we'll build a wall. It'll be an attractive, modest wall, they said; it'll match the church brickwork and keep the riff-raff out. It was affordable, it would protect the church property – everyone seemed okay with it.

Then, at the back of the sanctuary, a hand rose. It belonged to the oldest member of the church, a man named Sean. Sean slowly got to his feet. “This plan seems good,” he said, “well thought-out and reasonable. But it seems to me what these kids across the street need isn't a wall saying ‘keep out.’ What they need are some bathrooms! Why don't we build some out there?”

Everyone sat in stunned silence for a moment or two. Then some questions came back, objections over who would keep them clean and what-not. Sean said, “Well, I'm up at

2AM anyways. I'll take that shift." Then someone else said, "You know, I'm up at 3 every night. I can come over here then and clean up." Before the meeting was over, they had church members volunteering to clean those bathrooms – which were still theoretical at this point – from dusk till dawn. And that's what they did. The church built a row of outhouses in the front yard of the church. Church members who were there cleaning met some of the young people who came over every Saturday in the small hours of the night looking for relief. And soon, some of those young people began asking questions and building friendships. Not a one of them ended up in the Sunday morning 11:00 service...but now that church has a worship service with 300 young people...at 3:00 AM. Why? Because an old Irish man named Sean realized that God might just love those drunk college

students, and might just want his church to be part of sharing God's love with them.

We all – pastors, congregants, and churches – need to go back and read Peter's story of his encounter with Cornelius again, because Peter realized something that day in Caesarea. He realized that, on this side of Easter, the Spirit of God is always doing something new. The world is always changing, and in the midst of new change, we need to keep our eyes open for where God's Spirit is moving. Usually that means relaxing old boundaries and not holding so tightly to the way things were – so that God can share his Spirit with new people in new ways.

Peter grasped that. So, too, did the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Do we? I don't know if I've ever known the world to be in as much change as it is right now. But I also don't know if I've ever known the church to be more

necessary, our mission to be more vital. Will we be creative enough, open enough, willing to step outside the box enough to join God's Spirit at work? Will we look past the known safety of the church as it was and consider God's bold new world filled with people of every tribe, tongue, and perspective – and that such a world is at our doorstep, now? Will we go out beyond the reef into uncharted waters, trusting in God's Spirit to lead us where God wants us to go – or will we stand in God's way?