

[Title Slide] "That I Should Hinder God?"

ACTS 11:1-18 (NRSVUE) *Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸But I replied, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment* *three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life."*

L: The Word of God for the People of God. P: Thanks be to God! [Title Slide]

I feel like I'm preaching to the choir with this text.

- We Disciples call ourselves a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world; as part of the one Body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as Christ has welcomed us.
- Rev. Dr. Teri Hord Owens is the first African American woman in America—and maybe in the world—to lead a major Christian denomination.
- In 1967, the General Assembly of the Christian Church adopted the Ministry and Office of Reconciliation, aimed at inner city and racial justice issues.
- In 1996, the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) approved a church-wide process to discern the nature of racism in North America and to develop ways to help congregations address racism. As a result, in 2001 an Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation initiative was adopted by the General Assembly as a part of our vision and purpose.

And so, yes, in issues of inclusion or exclusion, I'm preaching to the choir, both in this denomination and in this congregation. Our congregation's pledge is "As followers of Christ, we pledge to stand up for respect, love, compassion and peaceful resolutions to conflict. We will recognize and support the value of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, ability, or any other factor. We will work

together with our neighbors to create safer, more inclusive communities for all.”

[Title Slide] So, I'm preaching to the choir; but like a clock or a calendar, every three years the text rolls around in the Lectionary.

While today's lectionary readings from the New Testament emphasize different phases, both bear witness to the radically new era ushered in with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The community related to Christ finds itself in the same old, familiar ballpark but playing a new, different game. Some of the players have changed, making for a new team. This new game requires a fresh, new set of strategies. It is a time of excitement and expectation.

The reading from John's Gospel is from the familiar ballpark: Leviticus 19:18, *“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”* In John 13:34, Jesus, with basically the same words, offers a new strategy: *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another...”* but adds: *“Just as I have loved you...”*

In the reading from Acts, we read about the new members of the team, and the expansion does not come without a struggle. Peter has this puzzling dream: the sheet coming down from heaven filled with all kinds of animals, but some of them are outside Israel's dietary code. The voice says, “Rise, Peter! Kill and eat!” But Peter is resolute: “No! I'm kosher; nothing unclean has touched my lips.”

The voice says, “What I have called clean, do not call unclean,” and the sheet goes back up into heaven.

It happens again. Same result.

A third time the sheet comes down, with a big ol' Virginia Ham slathered with cloves and honey. The voice says, “Eat, Peter!” But Peter is resolute: “Nothing unclean has touched my lips.” The voice says, “What I have called clean, do not call unclean,” the sheet goes back up into heaven, and there's a knock on the door.

Three Italian soldiers ask to see Peter, and they tell him about their commanding officer, Cornelius. He has learned about the God of Jesus and wants to know more. They're Italian. Gentiles. “Unclean,” by Israel's liturgical code. But Peter remembers the dream and understands through that dream that the Holy Spirit is bidding him to go with the soldiers. At the home of Cornelius, in Caesarea, Peter is in the midst of telling them about Jesus when the Holy Spirit descends upon these “unclean” Gentiles, and they begin to exhibit the gifts of the Spirit.

Peter says, “OK. I get it. God does not play favorites with God's created human beings.” And so he stays with Cornelius several days, teaching, even eating at the Gentile table, which makes him ceremonially unclean.

The Jerusalem church gets wind of what's going on and sends a delegation to Caesarea. They walk in, and there's Peter, sitting at a Gentile table, two pork chop

bones on his plate. So they drag him back to Jerusalem to face the church Cabinet.

Peter tells his story, ending, “...*who was I that I could hinder God?*” When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’” New game; new strategy; expanded team...

It really would be nice if the story ended there. But the expansion of the team to include new players did not come without a struggle.

The first major problem confronted by the church was, “What are we going to do with all these Gentile converts?” The Jews were not responding to the Gospel; but the Gentiles were—by the droves!

There were some who were reluctant to welcome the newcomers to the team, and they raised such a ruckus that Peter and the Jerusalem church backed off. The official proclamation was that the Gentiles could come into the church only if the males would submit to circumcision.

With Peter and the Jerusalem church leaders kowtowing to the pressure, that same group went after Paul, who was galivanting all over Gentile territory, converting Gentiles and establishing churches throughout Asia Minor and Greece.

They became a major bother and a distraction to Paul's work, following behind his back spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories. Paul's frustration is clear in the letter to the church in Galatia: “*You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law (in context, this is a direct reference to circumcision) or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?*”

Well, finally Paul had had enough. It was bad enough dealing with the pagan religions and the constant presence of Rome. Now he was having to deal repeatedly with his own people who were undercutting his work. So he went to Jerusalem and had it out with Peter and the council. And Paul prevailed, and the church leaders sent out a mass mailing to all the churches, saying that Gentiles were not to be required to become Jews before they could be members of the Body of Christ.

And so, the church finally dealt with Peter's question: “Who was I that I should hinder God?” That answer gets to the heart of what may be, historically, the church's worst fault. Rules, religious laws, creeds, doctrines always originate with the intention of clarifying the tenets of faith. Who can fault that?

But in practice, they always end up being used to exclude anyone who doesn't toe the line. Religious rules, laws, creeds, and doctrines, when used as tests of faith, always hinder God's work. Peter got it; and his witness cut through the legalistic red tape so the church could be about the identity and ministry to which she is called. The church was never intended to be an religious police force; she was called to as Christ was—God's agent of grace to sinners, and God's agent of mercy

and compassion to the least of those Jesus called brothers and sisters.

Again, it would be nice if the story ended there. The cycle of inclusion/exclusion has been repeated over and over in the history of the church--initiating rules that exclude... Actual minutes of church meetings tell stories about young people who were "dismissed" for dancing, or a man "churched" for chewing tobacco, or a woman "removed" for flirting. The list is endless. People have been excluded for being too liberal or too conservative. And while race and ethnicity are a top element of the church's exclusionary practices, it doesn't end there. You know the issues: abortion, the LGBTQ community... In some churches you dare not be a Democrat; others ostracize Republicans or Libertarians. It goes on and on and on and on...

The aftermath of such actions almost always is turmoil. Families and kin quit attending. People take sides. And people God loves become spiritually homeless.

So, while admittedly I'm preaching to the choir, it never hurts to review our core values, our bedrock beliefs, our motivating vision and our missional purpose—to remember who we are and why we exist.

I encourage you in this room and you who are watching our live stream: go to our website and study the page called "About Us." I believe we're getting close to the inclusive, open, and affirming lives God intends God's people to live. I believe we're moving in the right direction to manifest the vision of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), to be "a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one Body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table, as Christ has welcomed us." And all means all, because, who are we that we should hinder God?

[Prayer Slide]