

It's Best Not to Hinder God
Acts 11:1-18

There are some people you just don't want to say "No" to.

If I was to ask you to help out for a day down at Join Hands, how would you respond? Are you going to say, "No"? You might try: 1) No thanks. 2) I think I'll pass. 3) Maybe another time. 4) Nah, I'd rather stay in bed and watch Netflix. 5) I'm not really into helping people, but thanks for asking.

But, there are some people you just don't say "No" to?

- people of power and influence;
- people whose very voice carries the weight of authority imbued with a tone that bespeaks consequences and retribution;
- people who have the power to bend you to their will;
- people who are an immutable force of nature, and who can bring you to your knees with just a withering look, reducing you to a whimpering fool.

Great leaders usually have people around them who have the courage to say "No," because the great ones know that it's not a good policy to be surrounded by sycophants. But what if you were working for the late Steve Jobs? He thought that being tough was the only way to keep Apple from suffering what he called a "bozo explosion," meaning that if he tolerated mediocre people, they would hire others like themselves, and soon there would be a company filled with employees who weren't very good. If Jobs asked you for a favor, could you say "No"?

Think of the horrible bosses lampooned in the eponymous movie franchise *Horrible Bosses* from 2011 and 2014. You wouldn't want to say "No" to these tyrants.

How about other people of influence and power? Go back a couple of decades or more to when Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch were churning up the waters of telecommunications and other forms of media. You might not remember Turner, but from 1970-2000, he was big stuff.

Sometimes called "the Mouth of the South," Turner was frequently controversial. But he was also an entrepreneur, television producer, media proprietor and philanthropist. He founded the Cable News Network (CNN) and donated a \$1 billion gift to support the United Nations. He once owned more land in the United States than any other private individual. He founded the Goodwill Games. He maintains the world's largest bison herd on his Montana ranch.

Turner's mantra was "Lead, follow, or get out of the way." Say what you want, but he was, and probably still is, a hard person to say "No" to.

Finally, if you're of a certain age, you will remember the Chiffon TV spots in the 1970s in which Mother Nature has a taste of what she thinks is fabulous, creamy butter, but is told that it's not butter but Chiffon margarine. Whereupon, Mother Nature raises her arms and says with an evil

glint in her eyes, “It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature,” and then gale-force winds blow, trees topple, and houses collapse into rubble.

These examples explain why it’s astonishing to read in today’s text from Acts that the apostle Peter had the temerity, the chutzpah, the courage to say “No” to God! And he did it not once, but three times!

God is not Ted Turner, Steve Jobs or any megalomaniac to whom it might be hard to say “No.” But when Peter said “No” to God three times he was hindering and attempting to thwart the purposes of Almighty God, who:

- according to the Nicene Creed, is the “Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible”;
- according to Saint Anselm, is a “being in which nothing greater can be thought of”;
- according to Saint Aquinas, is the great Unmoved Mover, the Uncaused Cause, and who has revealed himself in creation and written his law in human hearts;
- was asked by David, “Where can I go from your spirit: Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there”
- according to Scripture, is the trinitarian God before whom Isaiah trembled and said, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

And this doesn’t even scratch the surface of the nature of the eternal and transcendent God. Still, was Peter crazy to say “No” to God?

To be fair, Peter didn’t resist God in a conscious state; he was deep in sleep, and it was in a dream that he said “No” to God three times.

While in Joppa, Peter was praying and slipped into a “trance [and] saw a vision.” A ginormous tablecloth came floating and twirling down from heaven, and before him were some entrees prepared for his consumption, things like “four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air.” He then heard a “voice,” and we have no reason to assume it was not a divine voice. He was told to “get up ... kill and eat.”

But Peter offered his first objection: “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” This happened three times.

We can assume that he was mystified by what he’d seen in his vision. After all, what he saw and was told to do went against his upbringing and education in Sabbath school, against everything he was as an observant Jew, and against the teaching of the rabbis and counsel of family members. Were he to act on what he’d seen in this vision, his ancestors would be rolling in their tombs. It was unthinkable that Peter would eat this stuff and defile himself in this way. He was a Jew!

It wasn't until later, when he was in a conscious state, that the meaning of this vision came into focus. The process began when three Gentiles, men from the north, arrived and invited him to go to a house in Caesarea.

You can imagine the scene. Let's put the men in sunglasses. They're in black suits, white shirts, black ties, and driving a black SUV with tinted windows. They arrive, jump out of the car, and "invite" Peter to get into the car. Their boss wants a word.

"Who is your boss?" Peter asks.

"Cornelius."

"Who is Cornelius?"

"An officer in the army of Imperial Rome. Enough with the questions!"

Peter is worried, of course, but then decides, "Okay, who am I to resist these guys?" He gets into the car.

They arrive in Caesarea. Peter meets his host there. He gets the surprise of his life. Cornelius explains that an angel told him that Peter would give him a message by which he and his entire household will be saved.

This is when it began to dawn on Peter (whose ministry had been and would always be primarily to the Jewish community) that God was doing something incredibly new. He began to understand that God had blown away the old categories, paradigms that no longer applied, and stale structures that no longer served the purposes of God.

So, naturally, he said, "Who was I that I could hinder God?"

Let's pause here to ask of ourselves: Have we ever said "No" to God? Are we still saying "No" to God?

Think about it: Don't we say "No" to God ...

- every time we are not hospitable and welcoming to the stranger among us?
- every time we refuse to love our enemies and "pray for those who persecute" us?
- every time we hesitate to "repay evil with blessing"?

In fact, often our lives are such a flat-out "No" to God, that one has to wonder in what way we're saying "Yes" to God at all, ever!

We have a problem with saying "Yes" to God because we're used to adding a qualifier. "Yes" is a simple, monosyllabic word, but our complex human nature wants to respond with two words: "Yes, but ..."

We get cases of “Yes, but ...” all the time in normal life:

- “Yes, but just give me a sec.”
- “Yes, but so-and-so won’t like it.”
- “Yes, but we’ve never done it like this before.”
- “Yes, but I’m going to need more money.”
- “Yes, but I’m going to need more time.”
- “Yes, but I’m going to need more help.”
- “Yes, but I think others should take their turn.”
- “Yes, but this is not my thing.”
- “Yes, but you should really ask someone else.”

Fortunately, Peter did not come down with a case of “Yes, but” He understood that it was best not to hinder God. He was sharing the gospel with Cornelius, the Roman soldier, and as events began to unfold, he realized that God was with them. The “Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had” fallen on the original apostles in the upper room on the day of Pentecost.

Peter recalled what Jesus had said to them about this. And then he reasoned that if Cornelius and his family received the same “gift” of the Spirit as he and the other apostles had received, “Who was I that I could hinder God?”

Maybe it is in our nature to be conservative and default to the negative when something new, unusual, or uncomfortable is happening. We resist change. Peter did—and then he didn’t. Peter said “Yes” to God, not “Yes, but....”

Peter said that it is best not to hinder God. But hinder God at what? About what should we not hinder God?

It could be that God wants us to remember that God is a God of new things. Gracie Allen of the 1950s comedy duo, Burns and Allen, put it this way: “Don’t put a period where God has placed a comma.”

What does God want? God wants:

- all people to live and “come to repentance”
- to remember those too often forgotten;
- to support those who are oppressed;
- to scatter the proud and topple the high-minded;
- to lift up the lowly and fill the mouths of the hungry.

Can we say “Yes” to these ideas?

There’s a lot of chatter these days about who is clean and who is unclean, about who is right and who is wrong, about right choices and wrong choices. This story about Peter changing his mind can teach us a lot, especially that it is okay to change one’s mind, opinion, or point of view. Especially when that changes our “No” to God into a “Yes.” Amen