

Give me a sign
Associate Pastor Adam M.L. Tice
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Acts 11:1-18

Wow, I drew a really good week in the lectionary. We've got the exuberant Psalm 148 with all creation joining in praise; the new Heaven and the new Earth in Revelation 21:1-6, and John 13:31-35 with the command to love one another. And in Acts, the story that serves as an example for any church that strives to be more inclusive.

This is one of those Sundays where it is really easy to read myself and our community into the story.

Maybe too easy.

After my initial excitement at seeing these great texts, I got this sinking feeling. I've pretty much preached all of those sermons already. Considering I've only been here two and a half years and I only preach once a month, that's a bit frustrating. I should wait at least another couple of years before I start in on recycling sermons. (I have to give you time to forget the originals...)

So in a desperate quest to say something new, I started looking at the Acts story from new angles. Instead of taking the perspective of the unclean gentiles seeking a place in God's community, or Peter, trying to open the gates of the church a little wider, I wonder what would happen if we put ourselves in the shoes of the church leaders.

Imagine that you're part of conference leadership. Maybe you're on the Leadership Commission that deals with pastoral credentials. What would you do with a pastor that comes to you with what looks like a crazy idea? What if, recognizing that the distinctions between apes and humans aren't as strong as previously thought, the pastor wants to start a new ministry to primates in area zoos?

Or what if they want to raise money for a space program for Allegheny Conference because they want to be prepared for First Contact, and they don't want to rely on government cooperation for intergalactic evangelism?

Ok, those are far fetched, but I don't think they're far off of how the early church leaders might have reacted to Peter's story of bacon and bed sheets descending from the sky. For the Jewish Christians, the idea of God at work among the Gentiles must have sounded far-fetched — even bizarre.

But let's consider something a bit more realistic. What if a member of a conference church comes to the commission with a sense that God is calling her to serve as a military chaplain or to start a ministry on a military base?

How would you, as a commission member, discern whether this idea was of God or not? I would guess that some of you have answers that have already come to mind. You might think, "Of course we can't support this. We're Mennonites. Working within the military complex would only serve to support and encourage the culture of killing. We should find ways to work outside of the system to promote healing for soldiers."

And some others might be thinking, “That’s a great idea! Mennonites could be a subversive witness, counseling soldiers about conscientious objection.”

Now, imagine how difficult it could be to reconcile your own initial opinions with those of a commission member who completely disagrees with you, while all the while trying to deal with a passionate pastor eager for your response.

(Suddenly it isn’t looking so bad that we’re not allowed to serve on that commission, isn’t it?)

This story from Acts sets a good example for how we might examine whether God is at work in a new ministry. The church leaders asked questions. They knew and respected Peter. Of course, they also knew Peter’s history of denial and ill-considered speech. But even while they were inclined to criticize, they gave Peter the opportunity to account for his actions. This entire process would have been useless if the church leaders were entrenched in their positions. Certainly, they held strongly to their beliefs and acted accordingly, but they were also accustomed to the idea that God can do new things. After all, these were people who had witnessed the resurrection. They understood that they were living in the beginning of a new world. That requires some flexibility.

It takes that kind of malleability to not only listen to a story, but be changed by it. I imagine that several elements of the story must have been persuasive to them. Perhaps least persuasive, at least to me, would be vision of the unclean food and the sheets. Visions can be subjective, and using “God told me so” as a justification for anything should be automatically suspect unless it is balanced by

further discernment. Herb Reed tells a great story of hearing that somebody had an answer to a difficult question after being up all night wrestling with God. Herb wanted to ask who won.

In Peter's case, he moves beyond the personal vision and into its confirmation through subsequent events. Hearing that six additional believers accompanied him as he went to visit with the Gentiles and that the Gentile host had a complementary vision would have provided additional heft to Peter's argument.

Next, Peter describes the work of the Holy Spirit among the gentiles and uses Jesus' words to indicate that God was at work among them. And he finishes with this incredible line: "who was I that I could hinder God?" The leaders are struck silent. When they speak again, they praise God for the new ministry happening among the Gentiles.

I see some keys to discernment here. Asking good questions, listening carefully, looking for corroboration, malleability and time for silence. And perhaps, most importantly, a willingness to wonder whether their reaction would impede or support God's work.

It is a useful exercise to put ourselves in the shoes of those doing the discernment. However, it seems we more often find ourselves in Peter's shoes, appealing to others to see God's work as we have seen it.

It might be tempting to look at the good discernment of the early church leaders and get frustrated when people we deal with don't do so well. It might be

more useful, though, to look at how Peter presented his case and invited his audience to change.

I love that rather than issuing a theological treatise, Peter tells a story. He offers a narrative, not bullet points. By doing so, he makes the church leaders fellow witnesses to God's work rather than debaters picking apart an argument.

While Peter is an actor in his story, his role is secondary — the protagonist is God. The story is one of God moving among people. It might be easy to argue with what Peter has done; it is rather more difficult to argue with what God has done.

And of course, Peter offers the stunning closing statement: "If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

Peter realized that God was already at work among the Gentiles. He even alludes to this in his report, noting that an angel had appeared to his Gentile host.

Perhaps the best we can do, whether we are the ones pleading for a change or the ones trying to discern, is to look for God at work among us. The startling thing about scripture and about history is that God keeps doing new and surprising things — moving in unexpected ways, and using strange people — even people like us. May we have the wisdom to not be the ones to hinder God, and may we have the vision to recognize God at work in weird and wonderful ways.