

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

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## **How do we hinder God?**

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The book of Acts describes the actions of the first followers and their formation of the early church. It's no great surprise then that much of the book is devoted to early church conflicts. Well, conflict really, while there were several arguments over it, the conflict was essentially the same: who is in and who is out.

Jesus has set his followers loose on the world, telling them in the first chapter that they “will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>1</sup> But somehow, at least for some early followers, that gets translated into “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem to people who have already heard about me; you will also make and enforce rules about who else can follow me.”

Strange how people can hear the same words and arrive at such vastly different perspectives. Another powerful example of this is found in our Gospel text today too. In John's Gospel we hear Jesus teach: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”<sup>2</sup>

That seems pretty straightforward, right? The clearest indication that anyone is a follower of Christ is their love for others. Followers of the Way of Christ

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:8b (NRSVUE)

<sup>2</sup> John 13:34 (NRSVUE)

love others with the *agape* love of God. We can tell someone is walking the Way by how the unconditional, *agape* love of God is at work in and through them. And yet somehow, there are people today who claim to be followers of the Way of Christ, who seem very **un**loving.

Not just people either! The systems we have put in place, or have allowed to be put in place, are indications too. They can either be loving towards humans and creation or they harm humans and creation. Those systems, and we who operate within them, either help or hinder God.

Peter, and the early church, were trying to navigate the messiness of community, the messiness of Jesus' sudden Ascension, the messiness of the Pentecost event, the messiness of traditions and laws, on top of the regular messiness of everyday life under the Roman Empire. We humans don't do messy all that well, do we? It should come as no great surprise that the stress of this messiness led to conflict. When humans feel tossed about in the messiness of life, we tend to cast about for anything that looks firm...which can often be what's familiar. And what's more familiar than tradition and history?

This long running conflict in Acts culminates with the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 which grapples with the inclusion of Gentiles in the early church; and whether the laws on circumcision were still in force for the early church, along with all the other laws of Moses. Peter's vision, his retelling of which is our Acts reading this morning, plays an important role in the church's openness to receiving Gentiles.

I am struck by Peter's summary statement at the end of our reading: "If 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?"<sup>3</sup> "Who was I that I could hinder God?" What powerful words! And from such a surprising source!

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 11:17 (NRSVUE)

Let's be honest, Peter hindered Jesus plenty in the Gospels! Yet clearly some teachings sunk into his rock-solid head!

And it seems to me that this is a particularly important question for us to ask ourselves, as follower of the Way: "who am I to hinder God?" And along with that, "how might I be hindering God?" Not just individual followers of the Way either! Communities of followers should grapple with these questions too! Especially as it pertains to inclusion, grace, and love.

So I end this sermon earlier than I might ordinarily, because I want to provide you with some time right here and now to reflect on those questions. Either by yourself or with a nearby friendly face. How do we hinder God? How might we better live out the *agape* love that is our Way?

Amen.