

About a month ago, I sat down with the worship board and shared with them the themes that I would be preaching through in May. Within those themes, I gave them some key words and images. Those images have come out the last three weeks, including today.

On the 1<sup>st</sup>, we had fish.

On the 8<sup>th</sup>, we had sheep.

Today, we have a blanket. The blanket and the ropes represent the sheet coming down in our First Reading. Thanks to the quilters, Rick and Peggy for loaning the materials and putting it together.

A month ago, when I sat down and laid out the month of the May preaching thoughts; there was no doubt in my mind that I would be preaching from the First Reading, the book of Acts. However, this week, my thoughts shifted as I engaged with the Gospel and Second Reading for bible studies and then the Synod Assembly on Friday and Saturday.

Each one of these texts could teach us some important truths. Since, I originally planned on preaching from Acts and asked the worship board to provide the imagery, I am going to rest heavily into this text, but I may sprinkle some truths from the other texts that could definitely be interwoven with this text.

In our Acts text, Peter is summoned to **Jerusalem**. When he arrives in the city, he is definitely not greeted with fanfare. **Condemnation** is how he is greeted. They verbally attacked him. They were furious that he went and had a meal with uncircumcised Cornelius. This act defied the fundamentals of Jewish tradition and Peter knew what he did was wrong.

His critics were faced with a tough question. **Can we truly trust Peter?** They were seriously wrestling with the fact that Peter was claiming that God spoke to him in a vision. Would God really to speak to him in a way that would overturn a key element in their holiness and ritual tradition?

So, how did Peter respond when he gets attacked?

Peter simply explained it to them step by step. In Peter's retelling of the story, he told about the vision and how he tried to not go in the direction that God was telling him to go. But, alas, he was convicted and listened into God. The vision that Peter had represents a significant and really unexpected change.

Big changes to those practices do not come easy. Well, Peter got a running start and started baptizing a Gentile household. That sent heads spinning. God's grace was extending beyond boundaries.

I don't think that this will surprise you, but it is especially true when those changes also widen the circle of who we include.

Inclusion can be tough. On the surface, we think that we want everyone to be included and we think that we want everyone to be at the table, but it is not always the case and at times, we struggle. One of the areas where we have struggled in the U.S. is **race**. It has been an issue for 400+ years. Race even entered into our Bible Study conversation on Tuesday and then there was evidence of it, in my opinion, at the Synod Assembly and then last night Stacey told me of a mass shooting in Buffalo at a grocery store that was race motivated.

The issue of race came up on Tuesday when we were examining the deep meaning of loving like Jesus which was and is the theme of the Gospel. We were being raw and honest on how tough it is to love and the struggles that we have battled when it comes to race. Then, on Saturday, we debated on the synod floor a resolution about race equity. In the hallways, there were a few whispers from individuals that did not like that roster ministers might be forced to do six hours of race equity training. When it came to the vote, it passed by 87%. But, that obviously means 13% voted against a resolution for race equity. We still have so much more work to do.

The race equity vote may be another example of how we still fall into the very human pattern of trying to hinder God. It seems like we still attempt to place limits on God's love.

As I was sitting in the assembly, I was taken back to the Fall Theological when I was conversing with Bishop Anne and told her that during Year C, I was going to be preaching through our baptismal promises. She then shared with me that, as a synod, we were going to be working through them at our synod assemblies. This weekend, we lived, no pun intended, into **“To live among God’s Faithful People.”**

Bishop Anne, when looking at the Acts text and looking at it through the lens of our baptismal promises asks three questions. I would love for you to ponder them:

- 1) How do I put limits on what I think of as God’s Faithful people?
- 2) How do I seek to hinder God’s definition of who faithful people are?
- 3) How am I limited in the lack of diversity in the people I most often choose to live among?

Back to Acts and Peter, one of my favorite lines that Peter uses is the following: **“Who was I that I could hinder God?”** The line is not only a favorite line of me, it was a game changer for the hearers. When they heard the words come out of the mouth of Peter, scripture tells us they were silenced.

Their silence then turned to praise. Their praises included the following words: Then God has given to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.

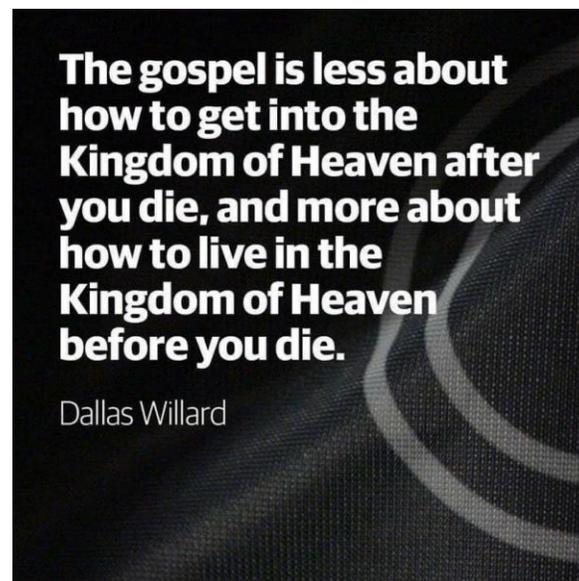
The Spirit was working in all of their lives because Peter speaks truth to it when in verse 12, he states: “The Spirit told me to go with him and not to make a distinction between them and us”.

As I mentioned, on Friday and Saturday, Jody, Dori and I joined 250 other individuals from our synod for the Synod Assembly in Oshkosh. Bishop Anne spoke to Peter’s question this week. She believes that his question is a question for us today. Who are we to think that we could hinder the work of God?

I love the words of Marianne Blickenstaff when she speaks into the thought of hinderance. She says, “rather than blocking the Holy Spirit’s movement, we can choose to ride the wave of the gospel success and rejoice when we are given an opportunity to offer new life.”

This new life can be looked at through the lends of our Revelation text and a very powerful quote from Dallas Willard that is being shared all over Facebook this week and I believe it is getting a lot of traction because many pastors have been sharing it.

Here are the words of Dallas:



We talked about this in our Thursday study when we wrestled with the New Heaven and New Earth. However, you may interpret Revelation and the end times, I think, hope, and pray that we can all agree that John is calling us to heal the chasms that we see and experience.

You also need to hear the words of Ruth Faith-Santa-Grace when she says that God's hope and love for all humanity and creation has always been about redemption and not destruction. We have a God that **heals** and not one that **hurts**.

Our Gospel reading leans heavily into loving one another. The Revelation text continues to be about the Gospel.

We are invited to be faithful. We are called to do the hard work. The hard work is to remove all that separates and isolates us from God and one another.

May we come to fully understand what it means to have God fully dwelling among us.