

Old Testament Lesson—Leviticus 19:9-18

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God. You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. 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.

New Testament Lesson—Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "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. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The 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. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved." And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." 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?" 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."

I haven't always felt this way, but certainly over the last five years or so, I've noticed that my anxiety levels start to rise whenever I'm forced to go grocery shopping. I just don't like being at the grocery store.

And it's not because I don't get excited about food. It's not even because I know groceries aren't cheap. The reason I put off buying groceries and try to get in and out of those places as soon as possible is because I always feel like I'm getting in the way.

And believe me when I tell you—I don't like that feeling—feeling like I'm an obstacle—like I'm blocking someone's access to what they need.

I'd compare it to that embarrassing moment when you're zoning out at a red light, and all of a sudden you realize it's turned green. You don't know how long it's been green. You just know the person behind you is blowing their horn obnoxiously and you've got to swallow your pride and get moving.

I'm telling you—it never fails. It could be Hy-Vee or Aldi or wherever...but as soon as I see someone coming down the aisle with their cart I'll go ahead and move on—even if I haven't found what I needed yet. I'll just come back around again and hope for an empty lane.

I don't know why the idea of getting in people's way bothers me so much. I just know I'll do a lot to avoid it if I can. By the way, if anyone out there can relate to my grocery store blues, I'd love to commiserate with you later.

And (who knows), maybe the peculiar anxiety I feel so often at the store is rooted in a bigger issue deeply rooted in my psyche waiting to be unpacked with therapy.

But here's the thing: what I find both striking and utterly convicting is that I haven't typically experienced that depth of anxiety when it comes to getting in God's way. Isn't that strange? I mean, it should clearly be the other way around, right?

Shouldn't I get those same sweaty palms and heart palpitations to the Nth degree when I think about holding up the plans of the Divine? Surely, I'm not the only one who just, kind of resigns themselves to accepting that God's way can wait—that justifies it by thinking, "I'm dealing with enough as it is..."

I mean, what's one more day, right? What's one more day of waiting to do the right thing—one more week to seek justice—another year or two or three to be merciful?

Shouldn't we all feel leaps and bounds more bothered by the times we've stood in the way of the gospel? Why are we less riddled with anxiety when we stifle the Holy Spirit than when we (in my case) hold up the line at Fareway?

As you may know, for a few weeks now, we've been making our way through the book of Acts—pretty common for the Easter season. What isn't so common is how we've been lifting up the role of the Holy Spirit as we go; and using the words from *A Brief Statement of Faith* as a sort of guidebook on our journey.

This morning, we turn our attention to a portion of that statement that really spells out why we're empowered by the Spirit. We certainly aren't blessed with talents and passions because God had nothing better to do! Lord, no!

We'll confess these words together later. But here they are now: *the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.*

Courage and boldness (and other spiritual gifts) are given to the Church with specific intention—not to wield because we can, but so we can minister in the name of Jesus—so we can be Christ's hands and feet in the world.

The Spirit gives us courage to show God's love to everyone without ceasing, to expose idolatry, to amplify historically oppressed voices, and to partner with our neighbors to make peace, liberate those in bondage, and bend the arc of the moral universe as much as possible.

Throughout the book of Acts and certainly in our scripture lesson today, there's a clear pattern of the early Church praying for the boldness and courage to fulfill its calling; and time and again the Spirit granting our ancestors exactly what they needed.

I wonder how often we're called to pray for such audacity today—and how often we actually minimize the need for such courageous faith—and for bold actions to flow from that faith. After all, we have this stubborn habit of protecting the status quo.

Feel free to disagree with me, but from where I'm standing, the Church of twenty-first century America isn't just intertwined with colonialism and a White supremacist form of nationalism, it's also made its bed comfortably in a consumerist system supercharged by technology—a system where we demand the kind of church we pay for!

Lord, have mercy are we in desperate need of some that “early Church” courage today—a double-dose of that spiritual fortitude.

And though twenty-first century America is wildly different than first century Palestine, I don't think we're too far removed in the ways that matter the most.

You see: The world then and now was a rapidly changing one—one where the pace of change seemed to increase with every passing day. Things were unpredictable—volatile—with tensions sometimes balancing on a razor's edge. The future was uncertain.

And in the middle of all this uncertainty—within a relentlessly cruel political regime and a religious landscape filled with new challenges every morning, the Church was being called to open its doors wider! Yes, the Holy Spirit was calling the ancient community to a courageous—even risky—kind of evangelism—one where all the rules and bylaws hadn't been written yet.

An ever-expansive vision was now being required of the Church—one where those worshipping alongside you would regularly look and speak and practice differently than you. There would be no invitation too bold for the Spirit.

Rather than specific rituals that set apart certain ethnic groups, the Church was to be characterized by its open doors and open tables. Because, for the first time in its history, you didn't first have to be a Jew in order to follow Jesus, the Jewish messiah.

For the first time ever, you need not adopt the Law of Moses in order to proclaim Christ as Lord and Savior. You didn't need to be circumcised or avoid certain foods or undergo frequent ritual cleansings. You just needed to believe, and grounded in that faith, to love God and neighbor. That's it—no prerequisites. Just faith. Just faithfulness.

Our scripture this day tells the story of Peter doing his best to share this good news with his peers and people—news that would forever change the way he and countless others would practice their walk with Christ.

But let's be real. To many, this news wasn't “good” news at all. We hear the objections early on: *the circumcised believers criticized [Peter], saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"* For these folks, Peter's testimony sounded more like a betrayal of everything they'd known and believed since the days of Abraham—certainly not gospel.

Peter's revelation of a diverse and inclusive community that welcomes non-Jewish peoples wouldn't be embraced by many of his contemporaries—for both sensible reasons and reasons rooted in prejudice.

This new vision of Church he'd received and experienced firsthand is a vision I believe is not only relevant for us today, but actually crucial for those who love Christ to reaffirm and embrace with renewed commitment. This vision is how God is reforming the modern Church. This is how the Church becomes revitalized and imbued with new life!

Two thousand years later, and we still haven't learned to get out of our own way. We stubbornly continue to ostracize and otherize. We deem some as worthy of grace and some not so much. We refuse to face the ugly truth that, deep down in our hearts, we'd rather not see certain kinds of people in the pews next to us—working alongside us—at table across from us.

Where is our sense of urgency, my friends? Where are those open doors and wider tables God made possible long ago? Where is our boldness—our courage to say, “Enough is enough” and “This is wrong”? Where is our holy audacity to proclaim, “You are a beloved child of God. You are worth our time and energy and we celebrate your identity in all its fullness”?

Our Presbyterian *Book of Order* puts it best: “The Gospel leads members to extend the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the Gospel.”

I think a reality check is in order. How arrogant are we to think we can withhold the hand of fellowship from anyone? How dare we divide Christ’s Body into sheep and goats.

It’s time we ask, along with our brother Peter: Who was I that I could hinder God? Who was I that I could hinder God?

Here’s the truth: the Spirit is moving and the Spirit has spoken. We’ve been called to bring the good news of an expansive Church into a culture that has deemed diversity and basic human empathy to be weaknesses.

We’ve been called to proclaim Peter’s vision to a society that increasingly prioritizes and even rewards exclusion, scapegoating, and deportation.

But remember: our Jewish ancestors know what it’s like to be strangers in a foreign land. And our Gentile ancestors know what it’s like to be finally (at long last) welcomed into the community of Christ.

So who are we to stand in God’s way? Where is our spiritual boldness? Where is that courage we’ve been gifted? I’ll tell you where it is, friends. Right here within our hearts. Right here within our grasp.

Take hold of it! Because now is the time for courageous action. Now is the time to follow the Spirit’s leading. Now is the time.

Lord knows there’s so much in our world that tries to hinder God—powers and principalities trying arrogantly to stifle the Holy Spirit. But the Church—Christ’s Church—will not be one of these things—not anymore—not with the courage we have at our disposal.

Now is the time. Amen.