

Who Am I to Hinder God?

One of my favorite musicals is *Fiddler on the Roof*. The main character is Tevye, a Jewish man in a small village in Russia who's trying to eke out a living, raise his five daughters, and hold on to his Jewish customs while the world around him is rapidly changing.

After he agrees to a marriage match for his oldest daughter, she comes to him and tells him she's in love with a different local Jewish man. Can she marry him instead? He weighs the options. On one hand is tradition, the papa decides who the daughter will marry. On the other hand is his daughter. He looks in her eyes and realizes how much she loves this man. He gives the couple permission to marry.

His next oldest daughter falls in love with a Jewish man who moves to Kiev to work for the revolution. This daughter informs Tevye that she will be marrying him. She's not asking for his permission to marry, only his blessing. Again he weighs his options, tradition or his daughter. In the end, he gives the couple his blessing and his permission to marry.

The third daughter begins a secret relationship with a Russian man. She gathers her courage and asks Tevye to allow her to marry him. Again Tevye weighs the options: tradition, his daughter, religious rules, the couple's love. But this time there is no other hand. Marriage outside the Jewish faith is a line he will not cross. He cannot stretch that far.

Our story this morning from the book of Acts is about stretching the boundaries and determining what lines you can or cannot cross.¹ This account of Peter and Cornelius, Gentile converts and Jewish Christians greatly influences my thinking when I consider gender identity and sexual orientation. This is something I've mentioned in a few of my sermons during my ten years here, but I've never devoted an entire sermon to this before.

Most of the other stories we read about Peter in the book of Acts take place in Jerusalem among his own people, the Jews. The story we've heard this morning demonstrates that Peter's journey with Jesus also takes him significantly beyond his comfort zone. Here we find him in Caesarea, a considerable distance from his more familiar territory of Judea and Galilee.

Caesarea was named in honor of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. The city contained a temple where the Roman emperor could be honored and worshiped as the god who guarantees peace and security throughout the empire. Caesarea was also the home for Roman governors charged with ruling this region.

In Caesarea, Peter encounters Cornelius. We know that Peter religiously avoids all things profane or unclean including uncircumcised people, the Gentiles. Among all Gentiles, the worst are the Romans who conquered Israel, desecrated the temple, and aided in the killing of Jesus. Among the Romans, the worst are the military, especially the officers, whose job it is to keep the Jews in line. When God sends Peter to a Gentile, a Roman military officer no less, he finds himself stretched as he considers what people a Jew may associate with.

¹ The information about Acts 10-11 comes primarily from the *Bible Insight* written by Jacob Elias and the teachers' notes written by Jamie May Smith in the Summer 2014 teacher's book of the *Gather 'Round* Curriculum published by MennoMedia. Supplemental information comes from BCBC on *Acts* written by Chalmer E. Faw, published by Herald Press.

It would be helpful as we read the Bible to be able to transport ourselves back in time and experience these events as they are happening. Knowing firsthand the context and the culture would help us as we attempt to apply the lessons we learn to our lives today.

For example, as we read the story from Acts 10, it's helpful to remember that there was a wide range of views among first-century Jews about how they might relate to non-Jews, to Gentiles. Some kept a strict distance, for fear of being contaminated by contact with them. Others felt free to relate to Gentiles, but only after they had converted to Judaism. Still others accepted Gentiles who worshiped God and lived in accordance with the moral law, even if they were not circumcised and did not follow Jewish rituals.

Where was Peter on the continuum of Jewish views about Gentiles? As I stated earlier, we know that he was a devout Jew who followed the guidelines given to them by God. However, the fact that he is staying in the house of a tanner probably demonstrates that he was already on a journey toward the inclusion of non-Jews. Tanners were regarded as unclean since they worked with animal hides. Many Jews would avoid tanners at all costs.

Cornelius is described as a devout Godfearer, a man of prayer, and a generous man who gives liberally to help the poor. He's a Gentile who follows many of the Jewish worship practices and customs, but he hasn't converted to Judaism. While praying, he experiences a vision, in which an angel instructs him to send for Simon Peter, a Jew residing in the home of a tanner in the coastal city of Joppa.

Like Cornelius, Peter has a vision when he prays. When presented with all kinds of four-footed animals as well as reptiles and birds to eat, Peter recoils and says: *No way, Lord! These animals are forbidden in the dietary laws of the Hebrew Scriptures! I've never eaten nonkosher foods like these before—not once in my life!*²

The response from heaven is: *If God calls something permissible and clean, you must not call it forbidden and dirty!*³ After this happens three times, the sheet with the animals is raised again, leaving Peter to ponder the meaning of this vision.

When the delegation from Cornelius arrives, the Spirit prompts Peter to invite them in and then travel with them to Caesarea. It's amazing that Peter overcomes any fear or hatred he has for Roman officers and goes with these men without hesitation.

There Peter addresses the gathering crowd. He shares his “aha” moment: God shows no partiality. He now realizes that what started out as unclean animals in the vision has come to symbolize unclean human beings, the Gentiles. God accepts anyone who truly reverences God (including repentance and willingness to change) and does what is right.

While Peter is still speaking, the Holy Spirit descends on the Gentiles, much to the surprise of the Jewish believers, perhaps including Peter himself! God is doing this! God is bringing about a revolution in human history! This “Gentile Pentecost” leads to the baptism of those who confessed Christ and received the Spirit.

Predictably, this action in Caesarea brings about a reaction in Jerusalem. News that Gentiles have also accepted the Gospel of Christ reaches the apostles (even without telephones or twitter), who express their dismay about Peter's close associations with these people. Though they criticize Peter for eating with Gentiles, the real problem is the deeper one of circumcision. For them the rite of circumcision was given as an eternal sign and seal of God's covenant, never to be broken, and therefore Peter's action is against the will of God and quite inexcusable.⁴

² Acts 10:14, *The Voice*

³ Acts 10:15, *The Voice*

⁴ Genesis 17:9-14

So Peter travels to Jerusalem to give his report. The initial opposition from the Jerusalem leaders is silenced as Peter shares his experiences. The facts of his story make it clear that opening the door to Gentiles is God's action, not Peter's. Eventually they conclude: *God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.*⁵

Later, at the Jerusalem Conference, Peter gives further testimony to his boundary stretching experiences. Peter speaks about how God is at work among the Gentiles and says they shouldn't be forced to follow Jewish law to become accepted followers of Jesus. The leaders respond by opening the door for Gentile participation in the life and ministry of the church. However, there are a few restrictions.

Even for Peter the attitude change isn't complete. He continues to struggle with how to relate to Gentiles. In Galatians 2, Paul says that Peter stops eating with Gentiles when some Jewish people come to visit him.

A key verse for me, the one from which I took the title of my sermon is Acts 11:17. At the end of his report to the church at Jerusalem, Peter says, *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?*⁶ Other translations read: *Who was I to interfere with God?*⁷ Or: *Who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?*⁸

Throughout the entire biblical story, both the Old and the New Testaments, it seems that two big questions come up over and over again: (1) How can I be faithful to God? To God's laws, to God's Word, to God's wishes? (2) Who am I that I can hinder God? Stand in God's way; interfere with God?

How do we proceed when the answers to those questions seem to contradict each other? How do we proceed when God doesn't speak to us in a vision, or send someone to our door, or when two different people are certain that God has spoken clearly to them and the messages are at odds with each other?

I began this sermon by stating that the story from Acts 10 and 11 is about stretching boundaries. And that this account of Peter and Cornelius, Gentile converts and Jewish Christians greatly influences my thinking when I consider gender identity and sexual orientation. We're all aware that differing viewpoints on these topics have stretched faith communities, including our denomination and conference to the point of breaking. People have left congregations, congregations have left area conferences, and entire conferences have left the denomination in response to decisions made about church membership and leadership positions for persons who identify as something other than heterosexual as well as decisions about marriage covenants between people of the same sex.

Opinions among those who identify themselves as followers of Christ, who sincerely want to follow God's ways and God's words, differ widely. Boundaries are stretching. Relationships are breaking. How can we be faithful to God? Who are we to hinder God?

Before I continue, it might be helpful to define a few terms.⁹ (I realize that even the way I define these terms may be controversial.) Biological sex, what is usually labeled as male or female, is determined primarily by anatomy and chromosomes. Gender identity can be described as an

⁵ Acts 11:18, *New Revised Standard Version*

⁶ Acts 11:17, *New Revised Standard Version*

⁷ Genesis 17:9-14, *God's Word Translation*.

⁸ Genesis 17:9-14, *New International Version*

⁹ Adapted from <http://www.queerasterisk.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/LGBTQIAP-Etiquette-Guide-and-Glossary-of-Terms.pdf>, accessed August 3, 2019.

innermost understanding of self. This may or may not match a person's anatomy and chromosomes. Gender expression is how we embody or communicate who we are to the world. Sexual orientation is who we choose to be physically intimate with, and how.

Some people would speak of biological sex, gender identity, and even sexual orientation as being on a continuum. Others would say it's only either or. Some people would say all characteristics are determined by biology and hormones. Others would say it's primarily a matter of choice. Still others, a combination of biology and choice.

As people identify themselves along these continuums, the number of categories keeps expanding. From Gay to LGBT to LGBTQ and beyond.¹⁰ It can be a bit overwhelming, especially for the majority of people whose biological sex matches their gender identity and expression and whose sexual orientation is toward someone of the opposite sex. But for someone seeking to identify who they are and how they fit into the world, proper naming can be life-giving and life-sustaining.

However a person identifies themselves, the crucial questions for each of us remain: How can I be faithful to God – to God's laws, to God's Word, to God's wishes? Who am I to hinder God – to interfere with God, to stand in God's way?

So, let's talk about God's laws, Word, and ways. There are seven biblical texts that usually form the basis of discussion about gender identity and sexual orientation. I'll discuss these briefly. I'm willing to talk more with any of you individually or in a group study if you so desire.

Genesis 19 – *The depravity of Sodom.*

In this story, Lot invites two visitors – who are actually angels – into his home. During the night, the men of the city surround Lot's home and demand that he bring the visitors out to them so they can have sex with them. Lot refuses and offers his two virgin daughters for them to rape instead. The angels protect those inside the house and warn Lot that God is going to destroy the city because of the people's actions.

References to this story in the New Testament talk about the ungodliness and unnatural lust of Sodom.¹¹ Jesus points to Sodom and Gomorrah when telling his disciples how to react when they are not welcomed into a house or town.¹² Is the depravity of Sodom homosexuality, rape, sex with angels, or inhospitality?

Leviticus 18:22 – *You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.*

Leviticus 20:13 – *If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.*¹³

These verses occur as part of a long list of instructions concerning the system of sacrifices to God, worship in the tabernacle, and purity (cleanness or uncleanness). There are questions about how much impact the ancient human culture had on these laws. A man lying with a man as with a woman could refer to status differences between men and women or to active and passive partners. There are also questions about how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus affects the rules and regulations in Leviticus. The system of sacrifices and the purity laws connected to them no longer apply. There are many rules and regulations in this book that we ignore today. How do we determine which ones might still apply?

¹⁰ LGBTQIAP+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, Other Identities

¹¹ 1 Peter 2:6; Jude 7

¹² Matthew 10:5-15

¹³ All verses are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless signified otherwise.

Also considered abominable in the Bible is the eating of unclean foods.¹⁴ Peter's experience in Acts demonstrates that this is no longer true. And in Mark 7 and Matthew 15, Jesus lists many other things that defile a person including evil thoughts, immoral sex, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wicked acts, treachery, sensuality, jealousy, slander, pride, and foolishness.¹⁵

Romans 1:26-27 – *For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.*

It's not completely clear what Paul considers to be natural intercourse. It could be saying that physical intimacy between a man and a woman is the only natural act. But some think he's condemning homosexual acts by heterosexual people. Others that he's condemning sexual activity between adult men and young boys. It's unlikely he even considered the possibility of committed same-sex partnerships. It's fairly clear that he is saying that immoral practices follow idolatry, the worship of something other than God.

This is also the case for: **1 Corinthians 6:9-10** – *Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.*

And similarly: **1 Timothy 1:8-11** – *Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.*

And, of course, we need to go back to the beginning, back to the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2. We've read these texts many times this summer. *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*¹⁶ *God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply."*¹⁷ *Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.*¹⁸

No one can deny that it takes male and female, an egg and a sperm, to make a baby. No one can deny that male and female bodies are designed to fit together well in physical intimacy. No one can deny that stable, loving marriages create a healthy foundation for raising children.

But there are other facts I can't deny and other stories I think we must listen to. I'll list just four.

I can't deny that two people of the same sex can create a stable, loving environment in which to raise children, or that one person alone can do the same. It's also possible for a heterosexual, married couple to provide an environment that is harmful for children.

I can't deny the existence of people who are born as neither male nor female. Some babies are intersex, with both male and female internal organs or external genitalia that doesn't fit well into either category. How can I say that these precious babies are not created in God's image? How can

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 14:3-21

¹⁵ Mark 7:1-23; Matthew 15:1-20, *The Voice*

¹⁶ Genesis 1:27

¹⁷ Genesis 1:28

¹⁸ Genesis 2:24

I deny that things that happen in the womb while a baby is forming may affect their gender identity and sexual orientation?

I can't deny the testimony of a dear friend who gave birth to a boy who is now a woman. This friend still has many questions but she can't deny that her daughter (who used to be her son) is now much healthier emotionally, mentally, and relationally.

I can't deny the many, many stories of committed Christians, filled with God's spirit and seeking to follow God's ways who identify as LGBTQ. They can remember knowing their gender identity and sexual orientation from a very young age. Many have spent years of unsuccessfully pleading and praying with God to take these thoughts and feelings away. Longer ago, it wasn't unusual for them to enter into a traditional marriage hoping it would all work itself out. The success rate of these marriages has been low. Some have gone to or been sent to ministries designed to change them into gender-conforming, heterosexual people and no amount of Bible study, counseling, and prayer has changed who they are. Some have embraced their identities and decided to remain single and celibate. Some have embraced their identities as God-given and are part of covenanted relationships and marriages. They have also welcomed children into the family.

Whatever the case may be, questions remain. Does scripture provide clear guidance to the church concerning human sexuality? What are the roles of tradition, culture, experience, science, and reason? Are the questions surrounding gender identity, sexual orientation, and affirming same-sex marriage covenants fundamentally different than previous changes of attitude and practice toward things such as slavery, women in church leadership and divorce?

Remember, the Hebrew law prohibited eating certain food, but the angel told Peter to eat them. The Hebrew law clearly stated that only Jewish people could be people of God, but the Jerusalem council (and the Holy Spirit) decided Gentile Christians did not have to become Jews to be baptized.

God didn't stop speaking and the Spirit didn't stop moving after the Bible was canonized. How do we proceed when two different people are certain that God has spoken clearly to them and the messages are at odds with each other?

It is clear to me that God requires self-control, faithfulness, and commitment in all intimate relationships. A stretching of the boundaries doesn't mean that anyone can do anything they feel like doing.

Above all for me, these two questions remain. How can we be faithful to God? Who are we to hinder God?

As we continue to answer these questions, especially as we talk with other people in this congregation and beyond who have perspectives different than our own, let's be sure to practice humility, charity, courage, and diligence.¹⁹ Humility that allows us to admit our past and current answers may have been limited or distorted. Charity toward those who may understand some things differently or even better than we do, even though we might think we understand better. Courage to be faithful to the path of our faith as we understand it even when it's unpopular, dangerous, and difficult to do so. Diligence to seek again and again the true path of our faith whenever we feel we have lost our way, which seems to be pretty often.

May the Spirit of God guide us and challenge us as we seek to faithfully follow God and not get in God's way.

¹⁹ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Zondervan, 2004, p. 30.