

Sermon Title: **“Who Was I That I Could Hinder God?”**

Bible: **Acts 11:1-18 & John 13:31-35**

When: on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 15th, 2022

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube live streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, please guide us to receive your message humbly. Please guide us to be your people, your followers, because we are not god, but because you are our God. Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. Peter for the Gentiles?

The first Scripture Reading today is from Acts. It is a story of the Apostle Peter for the Gentiles, who were considered foreigners. Please remember that this was not Paul, but Peter. At that time, there was a big difference between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile, foreign Christians. Jewish Christian men had been circumcised, according to their law from Moses. However, the foreign Christians did not practice circumcision. They went against the Jewish law. So, many Jewish Christians opposed Peter, who visited uncircumcised men—the foreign Christians—and ate with them. And that’s where today’s passage begins. Peter explains what happened step by step. He saw a vision. However, the vision went against their law and their teaching. After he saw the same vision three times, Peter decided to follow the vision, even though it went against what he had learned and what he had practiced. That’s

because the vision was from God. When Peter followed the vision, he witnessed the Holy Spirit falling upon the Gentiles, the foreigners. The same gift, the same Holy Spirit was present. Then, Peter said, “Who was I that I could hinder God?” Thankfully, the apostles, the brothers, and the sisters in Judea, and probably the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, were not only silenced, but also praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” The same Holy Spirit came to us as well. Even in Gilroy, we praise God together.

2. More Stories

Can we follow God’s vision, even if that vision goes against what we have learned and what we have believed? I had not thought of being a pastor in the United States, and I had not thought of being a pastor in a cross-racial and cross-cultural appointment. But I am here, because I said yes to my calling, and because you said yes to my appointment, right? We see each other as God’s children, and we see each other with the same Holy Spirit.

I would like to share more stories. At the beginning of this message, I shared that this story is not about the Apostle Paul, but is about the Apostle Peter. When we think of an Apostle reaching out to the Gentiles, which one is it, Paul or Peter? Who wrote many letters to the many early churches? It was Paul, not Peter. But interestingly, it was not Paul, but Peter, who opened the Christian ministries to the Gentiles first. Yes, it was the beginning of these ministries. But many Christians remember Paul rather than Peter as the Apostle for the Gentiles. Why? Later, unlike today’s passage, Peter was afraid of eating together with the

Gentiles. When the Jewish Christians arrived, Peter hid himself from the table with the Gentiles. Paul dared to criticize Peter. Paul was not afraid to go and eat with the Gentiles, like the Peter in today's passage. This means that there was still a disagreement about the Gentiles in many Jewish Christian communities. There was a kind of Church Council held in Jerusalem about this matter in Acts 15, because many Jewish Christians wanted the Gentiles to undergo circumcision, in order to keep the law of Moses, and in order to be Christians. What was the decision of this Church Council? To be a Christian, do we need to be circumcised? No. Regardless of circumcision or obedience to the Law of Moses, we can be Christians. Even if Peter opened the door to ministries for the Gentiles, Paul continued and expanded the ministries for Gentiles with passion and without fear. Now, many Christians remember Paul as the Apostle who was for the Gentiles.

3. Jesus' New Commandment

I believe that you might hear a lot of news about the United Methodist Church's possible future split here and there. Like the early Christians had their conflict, we—our denomination of the United Methodist Church—has a conflict as well. After several decades of struggle over the issues of human sexuality - the ordination and marriage of LGBTQ+ persons, the theologically conservative United Methodists separated themselves, and formed their own denomination, the Global Methodist Church, on May 1st, about two week ago. This was a part of a denominational separation plan, known as the "Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation," which is yet to be voted on by the delegates of the General Conference

in 2024. Because the General Conference has been postponed again and again to 2024, there has not been an official and final decision yet. Of course, there are many suggestions, possibilities, unknowns, and uncertainties. The official process of splitting the denomination will take a while, as we are 12 million members worldwide. This conflict is not the first one. We have made it through many conflicts. But if you want to know where we are, please come to me. I hope for you to come to me, rather than the rumors going around. I am trustworthy, right? I will share as much as I know. And I would like to say this to you. I love this church as much as you love this church, beyond my responsibility as a pastor. With our lay leaders and with you, we will get through this challenge. And as God was with our former church members, God is with us, and God will be with us. So, no worries, but please pray for our denomination, our church, and our church leaders.

The second Scripture Reading from the lectionary today is from John, from before Jesus was crucified. Jesus gave us a new commandment, to love one another. When we look at this new commandment carefully, it is about us, within the church, rather than loving others. Very interestingly, what Jesus said to the disciples before his death was to love one another among the disciples. It might be very difficult to love one another as a denomination, because the United Methodist Church has disagreement within, and because the General Conference might need to make a difficult decision as a denomination. But how about us? How about this church, our beloved church? Can we love one another? Let us make eye contact with each other. Whom do you see? We are different. But don't we see the same Holy Spirit in us?

Jesus gave us the new commandment, to love one another. We can start to love one another here and now.

Closing Prayer

O Lord, we are different. But you gave us the same Holy Spirit within us. We are different. But you gave us the new commandment. Please lead us to love one another. Please help to see your Holy Spirit in us. In Jesus' name. Amen.