Peter’s vision puzzled him because what he saw and heard went against his upbringing and education, against the teaching of the rabbis, and against the tradition of his people. According to the *Torah*, God asked the Jews to abstain from eating certain foods as an expression of their devotion. The daily observance of dietary laws calls the Jews to a personal relationship with God, reminding them that spirituality is inseparable from the “physical.” It teaches us that Jewish spiritual practice is about taking the most ordinary of experiences and transforming them into moments of meaning, moments of connection. As a devout, observant Jew, it was *unthinkable* that Peter would eat foods which would defile him.

Later, when Peter was in a conscious state, the meaning of this vision came into focus. Three Gentile men from the north arrive and invite Peter to go with them to a house in Caesarea. Their boss wants a word with Peter, they say. “Who is your boss?” Peter asks. “Cornelius,” they tell him. Cornelius was an officer in the army of Imperial Rome (see Acts 10). Peter is, naturally, a little worried, but he decides, “Who am I to resist these guys?” Instead of saying “No,” Peter goes with the men to Caesarea, meets Cornelius, and gets the surprise of his life. Cornelius explains that an angel told him that Peter would bring “*a message by which [he] and [his] entire household will be saved*” (v. 14).

It dawns on Peter that God is doing something incredibly new. Peter, who preached primarily to the Jewish community, now recognizes that God is breaking down the dividing walls between Jews and Gentiles because such divisions no longer applied in Christ Jesus. Such artificial, human categories only serve to separate people, and as such, do not serve God’s purpose. Realizing this, Peter said, “*Who was I that I could hinder God*?” (v. 17).

Let’s pause for a second and ask ourselves: Have we ever said “No” to God? When are we still saying “No” to God? We say “No” to God every time we are not hospitable and welcoming to the stranger among us (Hebrews 13:2). We say “No” to God every time we refuse to love our enemies and “pray for those who persecute” us (Matthew 5:44). We say “No” to God every time we hesitate to “repay evil with blessing” (1 Peter 3:9). Too often our lives are such a flat-out “No” to God that we are left wondering in what ways we are saying “Yes” to God at all!

**Peter Says “Yes”.** Perhaps we have a problem with saying “Yes” to God because we are used to adding qualifiers. “Yes” is a simple word, but our complex human nature wants to respond with two words: “Yes, but…” We get cases of “Yes, but…” all the time in normal life. “Yes, but give me a sec.” “Yes, but so-and-so won’t like it.” “Yes, but we’ve never done it that way before.” “Yes, but I need more money.” “Yes, but I’m going to need more time.” “Yes, but I’m going to need more help.” “Yes, but I think others should take their turn.” “Yes, but this is not my thing.” “Yes, but you should really ask someone else.”

Fortunately, Peter did not come down with a case of “Yes, but….” He understood that it is best not to hinder God’s purpose. He shared the gospel with Cornelius and his household, and as events unfolded Peter realized that God was with them. The *“Holy Spirit fell upon them”* just as it hadfallen on the original apostles in the upper room on the day of Pentecost (v. 15). Peter also recalled the words of Jesus: *“John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit”* (v. 16). Peter reasoned that if Cornelius and his family received the same “gift” of the Spirit as he and the other apostles received, “Who was I that I could hinder God?”

**What Does God Want?** Peter decided that it is best not to hinder God. But what does this mean for us? About what should we not hinder God? It could be that God wants us to remember that God is a God of new things. Gracie Allen of the 1950s comedy duo, Burns and Allen, put it this way: “Don’t put a period where God has placed a comma.” What does God want? God wants all people to live and “come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:19). God wants all people to remember those too often forgotten. God wants all people to support those who are oppressed. God wants all people to scatter the proud and topple the high-minded. God wants all people to lift the lowly and fill the mouths of the hungry (Luke 1:46-55).

Can we say “Yes” to these ideas? I think so. There is a lot of chatter these days about who is clean and who is unclean, about who is right and who is wrong, about right choices and wrong choices. In this story, Peter changes his mind about some fundamental ideas he held. He realized that God’s good news in Jesus Christ is for all people, not just his people. The takeaway for us is that it is okay to change our minds or opinions, especially when that new point of view aligns our will and work with God’s purpose.

There is a curious observation near the end of the reading. As Peter finishes explaining to the leaders of the budding Christian community in Jerusalem how and why the good news is being delivered to the Gentiles, he utters the words, “*Who was I that I could hinder God?*” The text goes on to say that “*When they heard this, they were silenced*” (v. 18). This is just opposite of what is happening in our world today. We are many things, but we are rarely silent. We are so busy shouting, condemning, being unloving, and acting unkindly that we forget to pause and wonder if there might be more going on here than we realize.

We are too quick to generalize, scrutinize, jeopardize, antagonize, stigmatize, demoralize, victimize, brutalize, ostracize, and marginalize; and we are too slow to apologize, harmonize, or even socialize with those who may be guiding us into new territory.

The people to whom Peter spoke were silent. Imagine that! Some translations say that they stopped arguing and then began to clap! They broke into applause, rejoicing that “*God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life*” (v. 18). We seldom rejoice when those “not like us” receive something good. We think if they get something, it will mean less for us. But God’s grace is abundant enough for all people, and God’s generosity with that grace does not diminish the grace given to us. So why should we not rejoice that God gives to all people “the repentance that leads to life”?

Christians continue to struggle with how to engage the issues of our times. We are reluctant to let go of the traditions and views and methods of the past. It took a global pandemic to shake us out of our apathy. The world is different now and we are challenged to live in new and exciting ways. Only when we relinquish the past and open ourselves to new ideas will we be able to grasp the new thing that God is doing. So, let’s take a lesson from Peter and entertain a new idea, go a new way, or try something new. Let’s be silent and engage in prayerful reflection, seeking what God is doing next. Then let the church erupt into praise and thanksgiving, asking, “Who are we that we could hinder God?” Amen.

Prayer:Inspiring God, grant us the power of curiosity and imagination, to see the world as you do; to look on our neighbors with love and acceptance; to welcome the stranger with warmth and generosity. Awaken our compassion to recognize the dignity and humanity within each one of your children, regardless of their creed or color, their wealth or environment. Strengthen us with the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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**Best Not to Hinder God**

Sunday, May 15, 2022  [Acts 11:1-18](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+11%3a1-18&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

There are some people you just don’t say “No” to: your mom; your boss; your spouse; the police officer; the nurse; the IRS auditor; and God. These are people with influence; people whose voice carries the weight of authority; people who can impose consequences; people who have the power to bend you to their will; people who are a force of nature; people who can bring you to your knees with a withering look. It is difficult to say “no” to these people.

**Peter Says “No.”** In our text from Acts the apostle Peter has the temerity, the *chutzpah*, the audacity to say “No” to God!What is more, Peter does it not once, but three times, echoing his three time-denial of Jesus in the dark hours before the crucifixion. Peter often screws up, saying or doing the wrong thing; but defying to God, saying “no” to God, seems reckless, dangerous, and downright foolish.

By saying “No,” Paul challenges the purposes of Almighty God who, according to the Nicene Creed, is the “Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.” Paul confronts God, whom Saint Anselm said is a “being in which nothing greater can be thought of.” Paul resists God, whom Saint Aquinas called the great Unmoved Mover, the Uncaused Cause, and the One revealed in creation and whose law is written in human hearts. Paul pushes back against God of whom David asked, “*Where can I go from your spirit: Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there*” (Ps.139:7-8). Paul disobeys God, who according to Scripture, is the God before whom Isaiah trembled and said, “*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”* (6:5). It seems crazy for Peter to say “No” to God.

To be fair, Peter was not in a conscious state when he resisted God; he was deep in REM sleep, and it was in a dream that he said “No” to God three times. In his dream, Peter saw a tablecloth float down from heaven, and before him were delicious entrees prepared for him to eat, things like “*four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air*” (v. 6). He then heard a “voice,” Gods voice, telling him to “*get up…kill and eat*.” This is when Peter offers his first objection: “*By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.*” He makes this objection three times.