

“Restraining God”
Texts: John 13:31-35, Acts 11:1-18
The Reverend Christopher A. Henry
Morningside Presbyterian Church
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But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ Acts 11:9

Imagine with me, for just a moment, this scenario. The Christian church is striving to be faithful to the gospel and relevant to the world in the midst of a diverse, multicultural, urban environment that seems more polarized and less stable with each passing moment. The influence of the church over the surrounding culture is weak and there are some signs that division and infighting are threatening its very existence. Christians are wrestling with the importance of theological orthodoxy in a culture of many different religious faiths and they are struggling with differing interpretations in their own community. Some have already begun to break away and refer to themselves as the only true Christian believers. Others have given up on the church in favor of vague allegiances to thin spirituality. Meanwhile, the most pressing concern among Christian leaders has to do with the question of who belongs in the community of faith and who ought to be excluded. The stakes are high for both sides and the future of the church is on the line.

Does this sound at all familiar? Like it could have come directly from a description of the 21st century church in Atlanta? Or perhaps the setting in your mind was the 1960’s or 1970’s, the era of the “God is dead” movement, the rise of fundamentalism, and movements for racial and gender justice. Well, both would be good answers. But I’m thinking of another time.

I’m thinking of the Christian community in its infancy, as it is described in the very first church history book, the one we call the Acts of the Apostles. This story has it all: disputes among church leaders, encounters with diverse religions and philosophies, the church’s early struggle with poverty and homelessness in its local community, even an account of a worshiper falling asleep in the middle of the preacher’s sermon. Some things never change. It might be taking things a bit too far to say that the Christian church has never seen a challenge not first found in the book of Acts, but the similarity of our struggles is certainly uncanny.

The best example of these parallels has to do with persistent question of who is in and who is out. There was no issue more hotly debated in the early church than the inclusion or exclusion of Gentiles. It is a major theme in several of Paul’s letters and much of the Book of Acts as well. The Book of Acts begins with Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit descended and the church was born. Though we often highlight the

diversity of languages and cultures represented on Pentecost, the story makes it clear that all those gathered in Jerusalem that day were devout Jews. The Christian church began as a minority camp within the Jewish faith. At Pentecost, there is no thought of including Gentiles in this movement. All the disciples are Jewish and all the converts are Jewish. The homogeneous community has its share of struggles, but whether or not to include Gentiles is not one of them.

They simply do not consider the possibility, until they must. And this is what is so terribly important. The disciples' assumptions are challenged not by a new set of doctrines handed down from on high, but by a direct, one-on-one encounter with a human being. He has a name. Cornelius. He has a story. He is a Gentile, a Roman soldier. He is a man of religious faith who prays to God, is generous with his wealth, and cares for others. In Acts chapter ten, Cornelius has a vision from God that begins with startling words: "Your prayers and your gifts have ascended as a memorial before God." In other words, God has heard your prayers, even if you weren't praying to God. Cornelius is then commanded to send messengers to Simon Peter, a man he has never met.

Well about that time, Peter also receives a vision and his is much more bewildering and even troubling. As a faithful Jew, Peter has kept kosher his entire life, but his vision is of God commanding him to eat unclean animals. While Cornelius immediately responds to his vision and sends emissaries in search of Peter, the strong-willed lead disciple protests against his. It is this protest that provokes the powerful response from God—"what God has made clean, you must not call profane." Within minutes, the messengers from Cornelius arrive on the scene, and Peter returns with them to the home of Cornelius. There Peter makes a speech, "You know it is unlawful for me to associate or visit with a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." That very day, Cornelius and his messengers were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and the church was forever changed into a community of welcome for Jew and Gentile alike.

The scene described in chapter eleven, which we heard this morning, takes place when Peter returns to Jerusalem and must account for his unlawful actions. To defend himself, Peter offers no theological platitude or creedal assertion. He does not appeal to reason and he does not refer to textbooks on how God is supposed to behave. His explanation is storytelling. This is how it happened to me. This is how my mind changed. It is the most powerful sermon in the book of Acts because it is so deeply personal and so wonderfully universal. God showed me that those whom I thought were outside the circle of grace are mercifully included, just like us. Listen to his final words: "If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed, who was I that I could hinder God." I think it ought to be the eleventh commandment obeyed by the church of Jesus Christ: thou shalt not restrain God.

When they heard it, they were silenced. But only for a moment. Soon enough they praised God and moved on, grateful to be told the story and now to live into this new reality. Cornelius transforms Peter, and Peter's story transforms the church.

The Presbyterian Church, along with most mainline Protestant denominations, is in the midst of a decades-long struggle over whether or not to ordain those whom God calls to serve regardless of sexual orientation. At its meeting last February, the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta discussed and debated this question. Just before lunch, two of us were asked to offer our reflections before the Presbytery. I spent several sleepless nights frantically searching for the magic words that would win the debate once and for all. I called a dozen friends and asked for their advice. In almost every case, I did not receive an answer. What I heard instead were stories of transformation and encounter. The stories were so powerful and heartbreaking they took my breath away. Stories of grace and mercy, changed minds and hearts. These personal narratives may not win debates, but they testify to a God who is revealed us in stories and experiences that make us who we are.

We are Christians. Our art is storytelling. Our deepest truths begin with phrases like, "There was a man who had two sons..." or "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor..." or "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho..." We are called to tell the story of Jesus Christ and how his story has changed ours. We are called to give testimony.

I am in the midst of re-reading Leif Enger's stunning novel, *Peace Like A River*. The entire story is testimony. At end of the book, the narrator's older brother asks him a fascinating question: "Don't you ever doubt it?" The specific "it" is not important. Here is the narrator's answer: "And in fact I have. And perhaps will again. But here is what happens. I look out the window at the red farm--for here we live, Sara and I, in a new house across the meadow, a house built by capable arms and open lungs and joyous sweat. Maybe I see our daughter, home from school, picking plums or apples for Roxanna; maybe one of our sons reading on the grass or painting an upended canoe. Or maybe Sara comes into the room--my darling Sara--with Mr. Cassidy's beloved rolls on a steaming plate. Then I breathe deeply, and certainty enters into me like light, like a piece of science, and curious music seems to hum inside my fingers. Is there a single person on whom I can press belief? No sir. All I can do is say, Here's how it went. Here's what I saw. I've been there and am going back. Make of it what you will."[\[i\]](#)

That is testimony. Here's how it went. Here's what I saw. It is how Peter approaches the church leaders in Jerusalem. It is how real change comes about. Personal, powerful, life-changing stories. A story is an opportunity to see the world through someone else's eyes and to walk in their shoes. A story is also an invitation to closer relationship built on trust and vulnerability.

I am often asked to share the story of Morningside's incredible growth in recent years. I think this is how I will begin answering the question: the faithful and hopeful people of Morningside Presbyterian Church made the decision not to restrain God. When I worshiped here in the summer of 2004, there weren't many people in the pews but there were popsicle stick funeral home fans that read: "All of God's Children are Welcome at Morningside." This was the vision that God gave this congregation and, like the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, those of you who were here in those days praised God for the vision and opened the doors a little wider and made the welcome a little warmer and the word got out: at that church on North Morningside Drive, God is not restrained. They are dreaming big dreams and they are preaching the gospel of God's wide welcome for all people. And the message resonated with neighbors in the community and friends all over north Georgia. Couples in their mid-twenties, families with young children, retired folks, responded to the message. Gay and straight, young and old, stalwart Presbyterians and some who couldn't spell the word before they got here. People for whom church was something new and those who had never missed a Sunday. Republicans and Democrats. Brought together by a love of Jesus Christ and a commitment to be about the ministry of releasing the message of an inclusive faith to the world. Well, brought together by those beliefs and a love for Walter Huff's music! The story of this church is one that the Presbyterian denomination, the Christian faith, and the world need to hear. I can't tell you how important it is for you to tell it. We in the church must stop holding God back, holding God hostage to our preconceived notions about who God is and what God is about in the world.

Because, and you need not tell my seminary theology professors that I told you this, the fullness of God cannot be contained in our catechisms and confessions and creeds. God is not restricted to how things have always been understood in the past. Even the deepest and most profound theological statements do not encapsulate God.

In recent months, Sara I have enjoyed listening to weekly sound bites from a project called Story Corps, a traveling sound-booth that records conversations and interviews and archives them for future generations to hear. A few months ago, the speaker was Robert Madden in Santa Monica, California. He told a friend the story of coming out to his parents as a gay man. He described how his father was immediately accepting but that his mother had a much more difficult time, first becoming angry and then blaming herself. Madden then pauses, takes a breath, and continues. In October of 2006, when my mother was passing, she put her hand on my face and said, "You are so precious. I love you." I said, "I love you too, Mom." And she said, "No, I mean unconditionally." Madden closes, "I was astounded. It was just open, beautiful acceptance. Simply the greatest gift she could have given me." [\[ii\]](#)

"Love one another," Jesus said, "even as I have loved you." That's it. All the platitudes and creeds and doctrines and dogma come down to this. Love one another.

Love each other enough to tell your story and enough to listen to another's story. The act of storytelling transformed the church two thousand years ago. It has transformed this church. So, go and tell your story with courage and the faith that God is on the transforming this troubled and blessed world.

[i] Leif Enger, *Peace Like A River*, Grove Press (2001), p. 311. Thanks to Anna Carter Florence for recommending this wonderful book!

[ii] <http://storycorps.org/listen/stories/robert-madden/>