

Getting out of God's way

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Ok, so contrary to what my message title may seem to say, "Getting out of God's Way" is not at all a sanction for all of us to sit back passively and letting God do the heavy lifting of our everyday living. Those first followers of Jesus in the book of Acts, they were changemakers for God in ancient times...we are the hands and voices, the disciples of Christ, today.

Permit me a confessional moment, and I have to say that, try as I may have to do God's work, I have many times messed up the divine plan. I had the greatest of intentions, I had a plan, well, what I hoped was God's vision for me, for the community. But discerning God's vision from my own is a real challenge. That is as true for church work as it is for everyday life.

But then there is something that comes out of nowhere! A vision... An idea, that just catches you by surprise. I've had more than a few of those. Things that I have resisted. My first reaction: That just won't fly. But it soars. It captures peoples' imaginations. It could only be Spirit-sent, I now realize. In my very first church, naïve as I was, to entertain the idea of a youth drop-in program early on in my very first ministry 23 years ago. On first glance it seemed an exciting prospect, but the people pitching the idea to that new minister, those willing to be leaders, were from the margins of church life. A wide diversity of youth, and MANY of them, flocked to our tiny village church for the drop in. It was chaotic! It was kind of scary, youth with checkered backgrounds were coming and we were having to partner with the local OPP to keep it safe.

I also got chastised more than a few times by my Elders, for letting them into the Sanctuary! In retrospect it all seemed incredibly risky, even irresponsible. But I had local police officers thanking me for occupying kids for one night in the week who had nothing else to do, and often were a challenge to police!

When God has a plan, I've learned, who am I to hinder it?! Then I read this story in Acts of Peter's vision from God that he was to eat very non-kosher foods, then with no time to think about it, he is ushered to a Gentile home – that is disgusting, spiritually to a devout Jew – right then and there he is to eat those taboo foods. God's Spirit got busy that day, my friends, counselling Peter first, then trying to convince non-Jew Cornelius to host a devout Jew with non-kosher food knowing full well that this was offensive. "Trust me!" The Spirit whispers. It all sounds very irresponsible, very dangerous, but o - k.

Echoes of a recent Bible story we heard about a guy named Saul confronted by a vision of Christ who knocked him down. "Why are you persecuting me, Saul?" Jesus says. The Spirit has got something planned... You see the Spirit was orchestrating things that day, for at the same time Saul, the persecutor of Jesus' friends, was being humbled, the Spirit was preparing Ananias, a follower of Jesus, to host Saul, care for him.

This is not a good idea, Spirit, Ananias says, terrified. "I know this seems crazy," says the Spirit. "Trust me!" Strange things happen in those moments of trust.

Looking again at Peter, given a vision telling him to eat pork against his better judgment; it's bitter irony that he himself he opposed this divine direction to eat all those non-kosher foods, because then his friends, the "Jerusalem conservatives", scold him for eating unclean food with Gentiles! When we people of faith, especially those of us who have called ourselves Christian for many years, when we get an idea of what is right in our head, we sometimes need to be knocked down and set straight!

Religious myopia still prevails in the Christian church. A fear of following the Spirit in fresh, even revolutionary ways, that only God can do something about. Think about centuries of colonizing Indigenous peoples, all the while holding, tight fisted, our skewed version of Gospel. How about sexism prevailing in churches even today, and prejudice towards people of different gender orientations. But make no mistake, the Spirit is hard at work orchestrating things so God's vision of diversity prevails.

Peter resisted his temptation to follow his fear and the Holy Spirit gave him courage to let go of his programmed religiosity – the way he always did things. Who was he to hinder God's plan? And God's plan was not just for bringing the whole household of Cornelius to Jesus; God's plan transformed Peter too!

Lewis Mudge brings this truth into sharp focus, saying:

An important lesson to be learned from this episode...is that, while conversion changes the convert, the convert also brings a new perspective to the message.... Bringing people of a new culture into the faith community calls for restatement of the gospel in terms that speak to that new culture.¹

Mudge calls it the indigenization of the Gospel; the message of Christ's love re-interpreted, over & over, in fresh ways as we share it with different people. That has been happening for centuries. As Spirit challenges us to share & live out Gospel love especially in ways that remove us from our comfort zones, WE ARE TRANSFORMED.

This week, I invite you to take a page from Peter's book. Discern, pay attention to what the Spirit is up to in your day. Especially be aware of surprising visions you might be given of ways to share God's love, those thoughts that niggle at you over and over again, that might be coaxing you out of your spiritual comfort zone. Perhaps our mantra might be: *"Who am I that I would hinder God?"*

Make no mistake, God is up to something. Hallelujah to that!

¹ Lewis S. Mudge, "Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.