

The Rev. Renee L. Fenner  
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter-Year C  
May 2, 2010  
Text: Acts 11:1-18

“Who are we to hinder God?”

*“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?”*

His name is Bill. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans, and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. A bright and brilliant young man, he became a Christian while attending college. Across the street from campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They wanted to develop a ministry to the students but were not sure how to go about it so they did nothing. One day Bill decides to go there. He walked in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt and wild hair. The service had already started so Bill started down the aisle looking for a seat. The church is completely packed and Bill can't find a seat anywhere. By now, people have sized Bill up in their own way and no one says a word to him or offers to move over. Bill continued to make his way and gets closer and closer to the pulpit. By now, he realizes that he is not going to find a seat so he simply squats down right on the carpet. By now the congregation is really unnerved and the tension in the air is thick. By this time, the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church, a deacon is slowly making his way toward Bill. Now the deacon is in his eighties, has silver-gray hair, and a three-piece suit. A godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly. He walks with a cane and, as he starts walking toward this young man, everyone is saying to themselves that you can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid on the floor? It took a long time for the deacon to reach where Bill had planted himself. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the old man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You couldn't even hear anyone breathing. The minister can't even preach his sermon until the deacon does what he has to do. And now they see this elderly man drop his cane on the floor and with great difficulty, he lowers himself and sits down next to Bill and worships with him so he won't be alone. Everyone choked up with emotion. When

the minister finally gained control, he said, “What I am about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget.”\*

My sister sent me ‘Bill’s story’ a couple of years ago. There are several things that jump out. First, the fact that Bill felt that he could simply be himself-what you saw was what you got. Secondly, although there may have been some signs for Bill that his appearance may not have been understood by perhaps most people attending the church across from the campus he realized that it was *God’s House* where all should be welcomed. His appearance would not stop him from entering. And when no one seemed to make room for Bill to have a seat I admire the tenacity of the deacon who welcomed Bill by simply being with him, right there on the floor. Talk about hospitality! And finally, there are the words the preacher spoke after witnessing this simple yet wonderful act of love, “What I am about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget.” It smacks of the old adage, “Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some people will ever read!”

I invite you to reflect for a few moments. Think back on how you arrived here at St. Barnabas. How did you hear about this church? Were you invited? If so, who invited you? How has it been being a part of this faith community? Now, think of how you have shown that hospitality to others.

In today’s first lesson from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter in Acts, Peter stands on trial before the Church leaders in Jerusalem. Peter had violated several of his Jewish customs and laws. A strict Jew would never have contact with a Gentile or enter a Gentile’s home or break bread with them. And a strict Jew would never have contact even with a fellow Jew who did not obey the laws. He had done it all! No wonder Peter was in big trouble! Also what was at stake was the question of who was to be included in the newfound faith.

To understand what is happening now we must quickly go back to the beginning of the tenth chapter of Acts which tells the story of Cornelius, a Roman centurion and a God-fearing Gentile who comes to faith in the gospel of Jesus. By God’s design Cornelius and Peter meet and Peter finally comes to the realization that God does not discriminate between Jew and Gentile. (I commend a full reading of Acts 10 and 11 to you sometime this week.)

As we heard read this morning, Peter presents the case for Gentile inclusion by retelling his own personal experience of his vision for it became evident to him that the Holy Spirit had fell on Cornelius and his household just as it had on the apostles! In God's sight as Peter found out, there is no insider and outsider, no them and us. Peter testified, *"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?"*

In 2010, we might ask a similar question. 'Who are *we* as a society and as Church that we should hinder God?' If God so loved the world that Jesus came not to condemn the whole world but to save it, who are we to try to limit the mission of God to redeem all of humankind? Any time and every time we exclude someone from full participation in God's work, we short change ourselves and God. And God knows that we as a people have written a long laundry list of who is in and who is out, who is clean and unclean. With God's help I pray that *we* will be able tear that list to smithereens.

You and I have an awesome responsibility out here in North County and to the greater community. As we think about who we are and whose we are as a congregation, as we step back to see how guests (and perhaps some members) might view us through our actions, our hospitality, what will their experience be? Are we willing to make room for the 'Bills and Billy Jeans' who seek refuge in this place, a home in this place, family in this place, God in this place? Will they see in us what Jesus commanded in today's gospel that we "love one another"?

This is not the time to hold back but to hold on! I am convinced that there are many, many, many exciting possibilities that await us as the Body of Christ, St. Barnabas. We must be willing to let go of all that that we are and have been and use all that we have and all that we are and will be to God's glory and honor.

Let us open our doors! Let us be open to all that God's Spirit has in store for us. God is making something new in our lives and in this place that we love so dearly.

May God be praised! Amen!

\*author unknown