

# The St. John's Pulpit

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## ON UN-HINDERING GOD

*Acts of Apostolic People 11:1-18*

Season of Easter, April 24, 2016  
The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister

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While living in Atlanta, I was leading a Bible study. Our focus that day was on the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter in The Gospel of Luke where we read these words of Jesus: *“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”* A sincere woman in the group asked, *“Do you think Jesus was serious when he said, ‘Do good to those who hate you?’ Are we to take him literally or is this some kind of metaphor for grace?”* **Throughout history, humanity has been trying to catch-up on understanding God’s grace.**

As disciples of Jesus, we are learning how to live the resurrection life; we are learning how to invest our lives in the life of the world so the kingdom of God and the will of God become a reality on earth as in heaven. We are learning how to understand God’s grace. When people fail to express God’s grace, the work of God is hindered.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of The Gospel of John, the words of Jesus’s prayer reveal that he prayed for you. Jesus prayed for you because he knew you were *‘in this world but not of this world.’* Jesus meant that your identity and your vision is focused on the Kingdom of God and not the kingdoms of this world. Jesus prayed, *“I ask not only on behalf of these present disciples, but also on behalf of those who will follow me because of their witness.”* That’s you!

Living in this world but not being part of this world can be confusing and make some people have strange ideas. Some people think it is possible to be a disciple of Jesus, yet deny God’s grace to some people. Those persons who did not understand Jesus were hindered by his eating with tax collectors, forgiving an adulteress, touching lepers, speaking to a divorced Samaritan woman, caring for the diseased, welcoming children into his presence and showing compassion toward the poor and those abused by the systems of injustice. Jesus refused to allow the kingdoms of this world to control him. Therefore, people saw him to be hindering God.

A few years ago, a fellow participating in a spiritual retreat for artists was handed a lump of clay and told to shape it into something that would help him understand how to live in this world while expressing God's grace. So, he shaped a clay frog and heard the message: *'You must learn how to live in two worlds without hindering God.'*

We are always trying to understand God's grace more clearly. We are always trying to express God's grace with increased sensitivity in the life of the world. We are convinced that wherever and whenever individuals, families, groups, cultures or nations choose to be influenced by God's grace, good things happen. Good things happen when humans take stones we have thrown at one another, stones we have used to build barriers and we begin using those same stones to build bridges for a new world. However, understanding the nature of God's grace and applying God's grace to the needs of others is an ongoing challenge of learning.

**Throughout history, humanity has been working on un-hindering God.**

As Simon Peter ministered to Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, a Gentile, he heard two voices speaking to him. One voice told him to keep things unchanged. Yet, he sensed this was hindering or opposing God. The other voice told him to go against theological teachings, religious traditions and cultural customs to baptize the household of Cornelius. So, this he did. Then, at their invitation, Simon Peter stayed with them several days; sharing meals with them.

Today's scripture reading continues this story as Simon Peter returns to Jerusalem to face the Apostles and believers. They criticize him for eating with the Gentiles. They do not even ask him a question. They merely pronounce, *"So, you ate with the Gentiles."* Step by step by step, Simon Peter explained his experience to them which began in prayer. At the conclusion of his explanation, he summarized: ***"WHO WAS I THAT I COULD HINDER GOD?"***

When followers of The Way of Jesus heard Simon Peter's detailed explanation, their criticisms were silenced and they said, *'Huh; God's grace extends even to the Gentiles.'* They were learning how to understand God's grace more clearly. Somewhere amidst theologies based on fear, or bias, or observing meaningful traditions, or guarding against changes that blaspheme God's nature, or embracing every new idea, is the theological voice of learning how to apply God's grace so we are un-hindering God.

Looking back 2,000 years, those early followers of Jesus in Jerusalem may seem to be shallow, superficial, judgmental or cynical. Yet, they were just like us; living in two worlds – caught between what they understood of God’s grace and what they did not yet understand. They were developing a theology of grace. And, just like us, they did not want to hinder God by discarding theological perspectives, religious traditions or cultural foundations just because Simon Peter had a weak week. Yet, neither did they want to hinder God by drawing lines upon God’s grace that God does not draw. They were learning that throwing stones and building walls is not the nature of God, and thereby is not the way to express God’s grace.

Throughout the centuries, many people have proclaimed to be disciples of Jesus; yet, they were blind to God’s grace and how they were hindering God. How else can you explain how a nineteenth century protestant English captain could be praying and reading the Bible on deck while down below he was carrying a cargo of African slaves to work on plantations in the new God-fearing land of liberty and justice for all? It is no surprise that when that same ship’s captain, John Newton, realized he was hindering God, he renounced his life of shipping slaves, became an Anglican clergyman and abolitionist and wrote the hymn, ‘*Amazing Grace*.’

St. John’s, we are serving God from the center-city of a vibrant and growing metropolitan area of these United States. Our efforts have far-reaching implications. We are learning how to express God’s grace during a time of tremendous change occurring at a fast pace. We are showing others how to express God’s grace by living in this world without allowing the kingdoms of this world to shape our identity or commitments.

I commend you for being open to God’s grace. You are committed to the Way of Jesus. You know the way of Jesus contributes healing, peace, justice, reconciliation, redemption and wholeness in our world. So, you invest your lives in the life and ministry of Christ’s Church and congregational community. You live as servants through your various vocational ministries in daily life bearing witness to the teachings of Jesus as you are figuring out the grace of God.

Figuring out something as big as God’s grace is a gradual process. So, let us continue to learn how to allow God’s grace to capture our lives. For God is more gracious than those who put limits on God’s grace want to imagine. We continue to go forth as servants of Jesus expressing grace so we do not hinder God. Amen and AMEN!