

WHAT I MEANT

Text on Sunday, May 2, 2010

Acts 11: 1-18

Does God change God's mind—ever? You may not have one mind on this question, and some may change theirs this morning. Consider. Old Testament stories are not shy to show God, as the old version puts it, repenting of the evil he meant to do—such as blowing up the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which God decides not to do after a tough bargaining session with Abraham. But the biblical prophets are just as bold to claim, “Your word, O LORD, shall stand forever.” A favorite hymn affirms Great is thy faithfulness, O God . . . there is no shadow of turning with thee; thou changest not—” Well, there's your answer, right? And every Sunday, we sing, “As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end . . .” On the other hand, Christians often urge that God suffers with us as we grieve terrible losses. Surely, to suffer with—that's the root of the word *compassion*—is to change. So: ready with your answer?

You know you've struck gold, theologically speaking, when it makes sense to say both Yes and No to a question about God's nature. It means the question itself is open to question—our whole imagination of God is shifting. I ask the church to understand that in order to honor the nature of truth, some of what we say today we must unsay next Sunday—so to be on the safe side, you need to show up every week. Does God change God's mind? Who do we think we are, supposing we can stand outside the mind of God like researchers in lab coats measuring the change in God's mind?

Yet the question could hardly be more consequential. Like the church I served in Buffalo, this church split over this very question decades before our nation's foredoomed Civil War. Here is a quote from an 1851 sermon offered by the founding pastor of that Buffalo church:

The existence of slavery was expressly allowed, sanctioned, and regulated by the Supreme Lawgiver in that divine economy He gave the Hebrews . . . [Those who hold that] slavery is necessarily sinful now . . . must assume that [they] are wiser and better men than the Savior himself and the Apostles, and that the government of God and the Gospel need revision.

All over the world today, religious people use God's name to sign warrants for their behaviors. *God said this, God wants that—I know, it's in the book!* Does God change God's mind? I think the question isn't really about God. It's about us. It shows our anxiety about how much we change course, often on winds of emotion that blow for a day or a season, but drive us into seas of confusion; and yet sometimes for a reason deep in the heart of reality. Which is which? We want an anchor. Or want to haul anchor out of here. You can think of the Bible as a record of how our forebears negotiated these seas, sometimes with anchors in God's unchanging will, sometimes with sail for the winds of God Holy Spirit. The real question is not, Does God change? It is, To which of our changes, O Lord, do you say “That's what I meant”?

The story we heard this morning tells of a turning point at the beginning of the Christian church when the leaders of the little band decided they had to change. They had been reading God wrong. People like to call Pentecost the birthday of the church, but this story is a better candidate for that label. At Pentecost, all who heard the apostles were Jews. If the story stayed with them only, well, where would you be this morning? But when Peter finds a meaning for his rooftop vision of that great sheet teeming with unclean creatures, then riffraff like you and me can come through this door of promise and hope. That is when the church we long for was born. See what was at stake.

The voice says, “Rise, Peter. Kill and eat! What God has made clean you must not call unclean!” And Peter decides that this is a voice to listen to. God knows, not every inner voice we've heard, not every impulse that pushes us, is worth our further attention. So there's the first big movement: Peter

interprets. *At last I saw that I am not to make any distinction between them and us.* Then he goes to break bread with Gentiles, and Holy Spirit power pours down on them as Peter tells of Jesus. And then, Peter does *not* haul anchor and sail off with his Gentiles. He goes back to the Jewish leaders of the Jesus movement to persuade them that they are reading the Bible wrong where they say it offers God's promise only for us, the circumcised. And they listen. And they are moved to a new word, even though the scriptures have the contrary set down in black and white. Now, did God change God's mind? *No, you did,* says the Lord. *When you said, We were wrong for all belong—well, that's what I meant. That's always what I meant.*

Now all this took place only a few years after Jesus himself had gone about the land showing what God meant, eating with anyone and everyone whether from Samaria or Tyre, whether a tax collector, a prostitute, or chairman of Goldman Sachs. Yet soon after he was not with us in the flesh, we began to forget how God's Word broke through the page in Jesus. So Peter, and soon Paul too, had to live it out all over again. Not alone, let us remember, but as resisters willing to teach that the Word of God sometimes breaks the words of bibles, and we hear a voice saying, *That's what I meant.*

You may marvel to see that the Bible holds keys like these to help us unlock doors which, some say, the Bible itself has closed against the outcast. Surely we may feel guided by winds of the Spirit today as we baptize Filip, son of Frank and Arie here in the midst of this plain parable of the kingdom, First Church, where we know we used to have it wrong, for all belong.

Yet before we turn to baptize new life in a little body, see with me once more the three steps in Peter's path, for this path belongs to the ages. One: there comes a vision, as if from the eye of God, saying *This is what I meant.* It is coming to one person, and even though one person's vision alone can never authorize her to say *What I meant,* still, God's true dream-catcher takes the risk to interpret her vision for good. Two: power comes down—a sign in the flesh that the vision is for good. The lame walk, the prisoners go free. Then three: the vision holder goes to the old guard. They are touched, not cursed. Those who are guarding the way-we've-been listen. The blind see—oh, not all of them ever, but the blind see. The deaf hear: *That's what I meant.*

Don't you wonder sometimes who will come to us, the old guard, with a vision we have not seen, with power we have not felt, showing us God in the unloved, the unseen, saying *What I meant!* In this way, we are climbing Jacob's ladder. Every round goes higher, higher. This is God changing our mind to how God's was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.

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