

The Miracle that Almost Didn't Happen

Acts 11: 10-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 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?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

To begin today's sermon, I would like to play for you a brief excerpt from a jazz pianist named Keith Jarrett. It is a recording from 1975 when he improvised for an hour and eleven minutes at an opera house in Köln, Germany. We drop in as he is beginning to develop a theme. Listen and enjoy. [To listen to the performance click [here](#). Begin at 9:04]

The people who attended this concert describe it as if there was a magnetic force drawing them into the presence of something sacred. The language surrounding the event are words such as mystical, spiritual, and holy. And the amazing part is that this musical miracle almost didn't happen.

The story goes that there was a young seventeen-year-old jazz enthusiast named Vera Brandas who had organized to have the legendary jazz artist, Keith Jarrett, come to their opera house to perform. It was pouring down rain on the night of the performance. And when Mr. Jarrett arrived two hours early to meet the piano he'd be playing he was caught off guard. Now, you should know Mr. Jarrett was very particular about his concerts. He would hand out cough drops to his audience so they wouldn't disrupt his flow with a cough. He was also adamant about the kind of piano he was going to play: only a grand piano would suffice. However, there was some miscommunication and when he met the piano that night, he discovered it was NOT a grand piano, but a BABY Grand piano. To make matters worse, when he sat down to play, he noticed

that some of the keys were sticking. The pedals at his feet didn't work. The upper register was grossly out of tune. There were only a couple of bass notes that functioned properly. Upon meeting this piano, he said, "I'm not playing that. Tell everyone the concert is cancelled." Of course, we know he changed his mind, we just listened to the recording. But his first instinct was to say, "No, I'm not doing that."

It is Peter's first response too. Remember he has a vision on the roof as he prays. A sheet falls from the sky with a bunch of unclean animals on it. A voice says, "Get up, eat!" But it doesn't line up with his expectations of God, so Peter says, "I'm not doing that!" The voice says it three times. Then there was a knock at the door and some people invited Peter to their church of Gentiles and he went and had a meal with them; and he experienced the Holy Spirit falling on them. Now Peter is in trouble with the high council again for crossing the line. "Please explain," they say. And his argument is based on one sentence: "Who am I to hinder God?" It's the Greek word, *koluo*. To hinder. To get in the way of. To obstruct. Who am I to *koluo* God?

I've spoken about how a few Sundays ago, our Session met with the Transgender support group for a meal. What I failed to mention was that when we got together we all wrote our names down on nametags with our pronouns on them. Those who identified as male wrote He/Him. Those who identified as female wrote She/Her. Those who identified as being gender fluid or beyond gender wrote They/Them. For many of us, it was the first time we had to write our pronouns under our names. As we reflected on our experience after the meal, one person said, "Honestly, I was a bit nervous, because it was the first time I had met a transgender person before. But you know I have to admit I had a good time." I imagine it is what happened to Peter as well. His first impulse was to say, "I'm not so sure about doing that," but after sharing a meal with the Gentiles he advocates their case to the high council saying Who am I to *koluo* God?

Then comes the surprise of the story. What does the church do in response to Peter's testimony? They celebrate! They praise God for what God is doing! Just as we did while celebrating our teachers and celebrating Ruthie who is going off to college. Like we did when Mel and Lea, or Margaret and Ann, or Jeff and Ray or anyone else announces they are getting married. Just as we do when someone joins our church family. We clap, hoot, holler and praise God for what is doing. The church council praises God saying, "God has broken the mold, even the Gentiles are part of the family!" Now notice they could've said, "But we don't want to be known as the *Gentile* church!" They could've pointed at Leviticus and Deuteronomy saying, "We have 3,000 years of traditions that say Gentiles are unclean. They could've even spoken the church's seven most lethal words: "We've never done it like that before!" But instead they celebrate! It could've been the miracle that almost didn't happen. But it did. And it still does.

As the rain poured down, in Koln, Germany, Keith Jarret, after walking out of the concert hall, waited in the car for his driver to taxi him back to the airport. It's then he hears a knock on the car window and sees a young girl—Vera Brandas, who organized the concert—standing in the rain, her clothes entirely drenched, the rain crisscrossing down her face. She begs him to play for the 1,400 people who have gathered. So going against all his instincts he has a moment of humility—perhaps he even thinks to himself, *Who am I to hinder?* And so he decides to do it.

On the way inside, however, Keith Jarrett tells his manager to make sure he records the concert as an example of “The train wreck that occurs when someone gives Keith Jarrett the wrong piano.” When it came time, he sat down and began to play. Nobody knows how it happened. But something opened up in him, something inspired him, something poured out of him. And in spite of a piano with sticking keys, pedal that didn’t work, an out of tune upper register, to this day, it is the bestselling solo jazz piano album of all time. Keith Jarrett had been handed a mess, he resisted at first, but then he embraced it. And it soared.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit hands the church a mess to figure out too. I feel very fortunate to be part of a church who has the spiritual maturity to not only embrace the mess, but to know that just because we don’t initially like something doesn’t mean it’s not good for us. Who are we to *koluo* God? The church could’ve been the miracle that almost didn’t happen. Except, it did. And it still does. God’s Spirit is still working in us, among us, and in spite of us. And for that we celebrate.