

Who Are We to Stand in God's Way?
Sunday, May 18, 2025, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Jonathan Timothy Stoner

I have a question:

What are we doing here? Why do we come—week after week?

That question's been echoing in me since Clergy Conference, where we were invited not to solve anything—but to sit with the questions Jesus asks in the Gospels. Questions that don't demand quick answers, but draw us deeper into relationship. Into holy curiosity.

Imagine Jesus asking you—not Peter, not the crowd, but you:

“Do you want to be made well?”

“What do you want me to do for you?”

“Do you love me?”

Jesus asks over 300 questions in the Gospels and answers very few. He's not rushing us toward certainty. He's inviting us to be honest. To be seen.

And that's hard.

When I sat with those questions this week, I didn't always know how to answer.

“What do you want me to do for you?”

I felt stumped—like a friend once asked, “How well do you know yourself?” And I realized: not very well. I wasn't taking time to just *be* with myself in God's presence—maybe because I was scared. Scared of the quiet. Scared of being seen and not liking what I saw. Scared God wouldn't like what He saw either.

And then I heard:

“Do you want to be made well?”

Yes. I think I do. But do I really?

Am I willing to release the old habits—my anxiety, my bitterness, my insecurity, my ego, my self-righteousness? These things cling to me. They're oddly comforting. Like Mister Rogers' red cardigan.

And then comes the big one:

“Do you love me?”

Yes, Lord... but it's scary to be that close. To be vulnerable. To be known.

Sometimes I feel like hiding—like Adam and Eve in the garden. Ashamed. Wondering: Am I truly lovable? Can I love You back if I don't yet fully love myself?

But maybe being seen and still loved is the beginning of healing.
Maybe that's what frees us to love back—and to love others.

Maybe that's why we're here.

Not because we have the answers. But because Jesus keeps asking the right questions.
We come to wonder. To wrestle. To remember who we are—and whose we are.

The world tells us: You're too much. You don't belong.
But here we hear a different word:
Come. Just as you are.

We come to be fed—body and soul—by the One who welcomes the weary and makes us whole.
We come to be transformed by God's Word.
To be re-membered—put back together—in a world that often tears us apart.
And to be sent out to love, serve, and heal in Christ's name.

The world says: You're not welcome.
Christ says: Come.

So again, I ask:
What are we doing here?

Here's what I think the Spirit is saying in response to this question... come be renewed, reoriented,
reminded of the love that holds you—just as you are.

And today's lectionary shows us how radical that nourishment can be—how far it might call us beyond
what's familiar.

(Pause)

[Acts: A Sheet Comes Down, and So Do the Walls]

In today's reading from Acts 11, Peter gets in trouble.

Not for breaking the law—but for breaking barriers.
He enters a Gentile's home, shares a meal, and baptizes outsiders.
To the early church, this was unthinkable.

But Peter isn't rebelling—he's obeying.
He's responding to a vision: a sheet descending from heaven, filled with "unclean" animals, and a voice
saying,
"Do not call profane what God has made clean."

This vision shatters Peter's assumptions.
Then he meets Cornelius, a Gentile, and witnesses something extraordinary:
The Holy Spirit poured out—freely, fully—without preconditions.

Back in Jerusalem, Peter faces criticism.
But he doesn't argue.

He simply tells the story—and asks a question that changes everything:
“Who was I to hinder God?”

That one question opens the church to something new—
A community where God’s grace is not contained by tradition or prejudice.

This is not just Peter’s story.
It’s ours.

Because let’s be honest—sometimes we, too, hinder God.
When we cling to what’s familiar.
When we draw lines around who’s in and who’s out.
When we let fear or politics or pride keep us from crossing the street, or the aisle, or the divide.

But the Spirit still moves.
The sheet is still coming down.
The walls are still falling.

And just like in Revelation 21, we hear the echo:
“Behold, I am making all things new.”

That’s not just a future hope.
It’s a present reality.

Every time we refuse to exclude, every time we welcome the stranger, every time we love past our
comfort zones—
we’re part of that new creation.

So when you speak truth in love—even to brick walls—
When you welcome someone the world rejects—
When you risk being misunderstood for the sake of grace—

You’re standing with Peter.
You’re walking with Cornelius.
You’re saying with your life:
“Who am I to hinder God?”

[A Table That Welcomes Everyone]

A few weeks ago in youth group, we watched *Everybody’s Table*, featuring Juanita Rasmus, a spiritual director and co-pastor from Houston. She spoke with honesty and compassion about the radical inclusivity of Jesus — how Christ invites everyone to the table, even those we might consider enemies or beyond redemption. She made a striking point: Jesus invites atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, LGBTQ+ folks — even someone like Hitler. Not to excuse evil, but to extend a love that is infinite and unconditional.

That stopped us in our tracks. It opened the door to deep, courageous reflection.

So I asked our youth:

"If Jesus invites everyone, does that include someone like our current president — whom our own Vice President once called 'America's Hitler'?"

We sat with it. And we remembered the words we say every Sunday at All Saints:
Whoever you are, and wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith, you are welcome here.

Does that welcome extend to Donald Trump? To JD Vance? To Elon Musk?

One of our queer youth — a young person whose very rights and dignity feel under threat in this political climate — responded with a kind of courage and clarity that took my breath away:

"Yes. They would be welcome at the table. And if they came, we would introduce them to our values — our way of life — where everyone belongs, and everyone is accepted. We would show them what it means to truly practice the way of Christ."

They hoped — even dared to believe — that such welcome might soften hearts.

This conversation with our youth reminded me of someone I met at a Houston conference for LGBTQ+ Christians and allies — a big-hearted, nonbinary Christian named Lē.

Years earlier, during the marriage equality movement, Lē had done something remarkable. Inspired by the 1914 Christmas Truce — when enemy soldiers in World War I climbed out of their trenches to sing carols, break bread, and bury their dead together — Lē dared to cross the protest lines outside their state house in Indiana.

It was the day legislators debated the so-called "Religious Freedom Restoration Act," designed to let Christian-owned businesses refuse service to LGBTQ+ people. The halls were filled with demonstrators: conservative Christians on one side, LGBTQ+ folks and allies on the other.

Lē stood there — visibly queer, unmistakably Christian — and felt called to move toward those advocating for the bill. One by one, they did something unexpected. They approached people "on the other side" and said gently,
"Would you pray with me?"

Not debate. Not argue. Not defend. Just... pray.

Surprisingly, no one refused. People took Lē's hands, put arms around their shoulders, spoke above the noise, prayed with thoughtfulness and tenderness.

Lē may not have changed minds that day. But they made a sacred offering: not of agreement, but of shared humanity — a kind of grace on the sidewalk. Later, an older gay man with tears in his eyes thanked them, saying,
"I needed to see what you did today. Thank you."

Lē said this experience reminded them that even people whose beliefs had hurt them were still capable of kindness, connection, and perhaps change.

These stories remind me that maybe our youth and my friend Lē understand something about the Way of Jesus I'm still learning. Maybe you are too.

Because let's be honest — it's really freaking hard to love our enemies. Am I right? But that's the call. The way of Christ is radical love. It's inclusion, grace, and growth. It means resisting systems that harm — and still seeing divine worth in every person, even those who've caused it.

We believe people can change. We believe God's love can break through even the hardest hearts. We believe in a gospel that begins with belonging — and keeps widening the circle.

The world says: You don't belong.
But Christ whispers:
You do. You always did.
And so do you... and you... and you...

(pause)

Contrary to the fear-based narratives of the *Left Behind* books and films that dominated the late '90s and early 2000s, the book of Revelation is not about escaping this world through rapture. It's not about abandonment. It's about *embrace*.

A new heaven, joined with a new earth.
God dwelling with us.
No more death.
No more tears.
No more exclusion.

It's a radically countercultural vision.
A holy reversal of everything the world tells us is powerful.
And at its core is this simple, defiant truth:

You belong.
You matter.
You are loved.
You are welcome at God's table.

The kingdoms of this world—including our current president—mock what looks humble, slow, and powerless.
They scoff at compassion.
They dismiss tenderness.
They overlook anything that doesn't dominate or dazzle.

But as theologian Kat Armas reminds us, the chrysalis—the cocoon—quiet, hidden, easily ignored—is where the impossible begins.
And what emerges from it was never meant to crawl.
It was meant to fly.

It might not look like power.
It might not sound like progress.
It might not feel like transformation.
But in that still, sacred space where nothing seems to be happening, a miracle is in motion.

The stillness conceals a struggle.
The waiting hides the work.
What looks like dying is actually the doorway to life.

The chrysalis that holds the caterpillar may seem small, fragile, insignificant.
But it holds resurrection.

Because what God is doing in you, in us, in the world—
Was never meant to stay stuck.
Never meant to stay small.
Never meant to stay earthbound.

It was always meant to rise.
To break open.
To take flight.

The kingdom of God takes root in what the world writes off:
A mustard seed of faith.
A whisper of hope.
A love that refuses to let go.

Dr. King spoke of a revolution of love—creative, redemptive, powerful enough to rebuild what the forces of fear and hate have torn down.
That revolution isn't far off.
It's already here.
Unfolding in us, through us, among us.

Like hundreds of butterflies rising from captivity, we are breaking free—
From systems of domination and exclusion.
From shame and silence.
From anything that tells us we are unworthy of love.

And the Spirit still whispers:
You belong.
You matter.
You are loved.

[Closing: May We Be Such Prophets]

So what are we doing here?

We are unlearning the lie that says, **“You don’t belong,”** and reclaiming the deeper truth: **“You do.”**

We gather around the One who laid down power, picked up the cross, and promised never to leave us orphaned.

Let the church rise—not as gatekeepers, but greeters; not defenders of fragile systems, but prophets of a belonging that cannot be undone.

The youth at All Saints remind us that this belonging reaches even to those we find hardest to welcome—those we disagree with, even those in power. My friend Lē lives this truth, offering radical grace in divided places.

These glimpses of courage call us to do the same:

To confront fear with compassion.

To meet division with mercy.

To risk love where it’s hardest.

Let us say with Peter: **“Who are we to hinder God?”**

Formed by God’s unstoppable love, let us go into the world with hearts wide open—believing we belong, we matter, and everyone we meet does too.

And as we go—spreading our wings like newly emerged butterflies of all colors, shapes, and sizes—may our very presence boldly, tenderly, and beautifully proclaim:

You belong.

You matter.

God loves you.

And because I see you through God’s eyes—

I love you, too.

May it be so. Amen.