Playing Favorites

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Acts 10:34-43

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I titled this sermon *Playing Favorites*. Playing favorites is harmless when it comes to choosing a favorite restaurant, favorite foods or favorite teams. Playing favorites with people can be lethal. Maybe you have been on the receiving end of coaches who play favorites, teachers who play favorites, bosses who play favorites. Parents and grandparents who play favorites undermine family life. Today’s sermon is all about playing favorites.

We have come to a watershed moment in our sermon series in Acts. For the first nine chapters, membership in the early church is comprised entirely of Jewish Christians. In the transition chapters of 10-11, it is open season on whether the church will evangelize and admit Gentiles. This decision will have a direct bearing on everything that follows in chapters 12-28. It explains why Luke devotes nearly two chapters and 66 verses to tell this single story.

Our story begins with Cornelius, a Roman centurion. A centurion has oversight over a hundred soldiers. Luke describes him as devout and God-fearing. While he is not likely a convert to Judaism given the complications of being a Roman soldier, he is generous and prayerful. An angel pays a visit to Cornelius, directing him to send for the Apostle Peter, located in Joppa, some forty miles away.

The scene shifts, verse 9, to a rooftop in Joppa. Peter is a guest at the home of Simon, the tanner. Two guys from the Monday Night Men’s group sent a picture of this house in Tel Aviv, reported to be Simon’s home where Peter prayed.
Peter falls into a trance. A sheet lowers from heaven containing a menagerie of animals, both clean and unclean. A voice commands Peter to kill and eat (sorry, vegans). Peter is fastiduous about keeping Old Testament kosher food laws, so he answers the voice with a resounding “No,” along the lines of “no way.” Yet the vision comes in triplicates. Each time Peter flatly refuses the offer.

Peter is still contemplating the vision when there is a knock at the door. Cornelius’ servants have arrived to escort Peter to Caesarea where Cornelius lives. They arrive at Cornelius’ home, where the centurion has called together a gathering of family and close friends.

Peter announces to the assembled guests, “You are well aware it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean” (10:28). Peter has already put it together that his earlier vision was not about animals but about people.

Cornelius details his visit from the angel. He gives Peter freedom to preach whatever God has commanded him to say.

Peter introduces his sermon with a confession, “I now realize God does not show favoritism” (10:34). The Greek word for favoritism literally translates, “one who is partial to face.” It amounts to giving preferential treatment to external factors such as appearance, ethnicity or social status. Peter drives God’s impartiality home in verse 35:

I now realize that God doesn’t show favoritism
Acts 10.34
“God accepts from every nation the one who honors him and does what is right.” In verse 36, he declares that Jesus Christ is Lord of all and not of some. He closes his sermon with the words in verse 43, “Everyone who believes in Christ receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Peter never has a chance to finish his sermon. The Holy Spirit falls on everyone, like what happened at Pentecost in Acts 2. People are filled with the Spirit and speak in tongues. It amounts to Gentile Pentecost.

Conversion has dominated the last three chapters in Acts. In chapter 8, Luke chronicles the conversion of an Ethiopian man. In Acts 9, he recounts the conversion of Saul turned Paul. Here in Acts 10, two people are converted. The conversion of Cornelius is obvious enough, yet Peter is also converted. The idea that God does not play favorites moves from Peter’s head to his heart.

The Bible declares categorically that God doesn’t play favorites. In the Torah, the book of Deuteronomy we read, “God shows no partiality” (10:17). In the early history recorded in Second Chronicles, we are told, “There is no partiality with God” (19:7). Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “God does not show favoritism” (2:11). He communicates much the same message in letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, “There is no favoritism with God” (Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25).
So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Two applications come to mind. The first is about you. The second is about you in relationship to other people.

First application. Stop debating with yourself as to whether you are one of God’s favorites. God doesn’t play favorites. Period! End of story. Any thoughts along the lines that God does not like me is crazy talk, what AA calls “stinkin’ thinkin’.”

Then why do so many bad things happen to me, you ask? If we are going to ask this question only in one direction, we end up with a distortion. We must ask why so many bad things happen alongside why so many good things happen to us.

We are the recipients of God’s favor. The Bible calls it grace, God’s unmerited favor: Favor beyond our deserving; favor in each day we are privileged to enjoy; favor in any measure of health we enjoy today; favor in offering us the costly gift of forgiveness through Jesus Christ—so much favor; so much grace.

David Benner writes in the first page of *Surrender to Love*, “Imagine God thinking about you. What do you assume God feels when you come to mind?” When he asks people this question, a surprising number of people answer that the first thing they assume God feels for them is disappointment. They are convinced their sin first catches God’s attention. Benner concludes, “I think they are wrong and the consequences of such a view of God are enormous.”
“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Don’t leave off the next verse, “For God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but to save the world.”

Second application: If God doesn’t play favorites, neither should we. If only it was all so easy. Playing favorites is sneakily subtle. It is easy to spot in others yet hard to see in ourselves.

The Georgetown School of Business surveyed 300+ senior executives of large companies of at least a thousand employees. These senior business leaders acknowledged that favoritism is a decisive factor in whether people receive promotions. While they acknowledge by a wide margin—84 percent—that favoritism takes place in their companies, only 23 percent of them recognize favoritism in themselves.

I think back to a 2011 Time magazine cover story article, Why Mom Liked You Best: The Science of Favoritism, written by journalist Jeffrey Kluger. The article relied heavily on a study conducted by a professor at the University of California at Davis. He interviewed 400 sets of parents and their children over three years. The study concludes that 65 percent of all moms and 70 percent of all dads exhibit a preference for one child.

There is an asterisk attached to this Time magazine headline. If you follow the asterisk to the bottom of the page, the footnote reads, “Of course she [meaning mom] will never admit to it.” Parents aspire to love children equally.
Yet, the research tells a different story. Most parents display a bias for one child, based on criteria like brains, birth order and personality.

If you want to weigh the damage caused by parental favoritism, read the last thirteen chapters of Genesis. This story has favoritism written all over it. Father Jacob has 12 sons with four different women (that’s a story for another day!). Jacob displays preferential treatment for Joseph, his second youngest son. There is nothing subtle about his favoritism. Even our narrator knows about it. He writes at the outset of the story, “Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons” (37:3). It explains why Joseph’s brothers become jealous when their father fashions a coat of many colors for Joseph. What a mess created by favoritism.

James writes, “Believers must not show favoritism” (2:1). He illustrates his point by describing the common tendency to show preferential treatment to rich people at the expense of the poor. He leaves nothing to chance at the end of the passage: “If you show favoritism, you sin” (2:9).

The 20th century preacher Will Campbell said, “Playing favorites is easy; loving people indiscriminately is hard work.” He ought to know. He worked as chaplain at Mississippi State in the early 1950s and was roundly criticized for his support of integration. He was one of nine people who escorted black students to integrate Little Rock, Arkansas public schools. He joined Martin Luther King, Jr. as the only white person to attend the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.
Campbell found it easy to justify hating redneck bigots who hated him. He found it convenient to conclude that God was always on his side—that God hates all the same people he hates.

So, he began to work the other side of the street. He resolved to love the redneck bigots who hated him. “Jesus died for rednecks,” he told people. He even went so far as to mingle with racists and Klansmen. He became, as it were, the civil rights chaplain for the Ku Klux Klan. Now he was a target from the left as well as the right. He said in his defense, “If you are going to love one, you’ve got to love the other.”

We discriminate against people who disagree with us, whether liberal or conservative, democrat or republican, rich or poor or any other classification of people. Don’t be too quick to assume that you don’t play favorites. Ask God to reveal your capacity to show preferential treatment to people. Campbell is right, “playing favorites is easy; loving people indiscriminately is hard work.”

If God doesn’t play favorites, neither should we.