

First Sunday after Epiphany
January 8, 2016
Acts 10:34-38
God Does Not Show Favoritism
Rev. George Ferch

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

All of us play favorites. Another word for favorite, or favoritism, is preference. We have a favorite sports team. We prefer a particular restaurant chain. If I am playing a family game, I want the one who has the most skill in that game.

Favoritism may extend to the people I choose as friends. Do you have a favored aunt or uncle? Is there a certain type of person we would prefer to have as a member of Bethlehem? What ifs are dangerous ground, but what if God favored certain people over others? Would I be one of the favorites?

We show favoritism, not always in a sinful way but sometimes sinning. James warns us in his epistle against sinful favoritism that invites the rich to take a good seat in our midst, and makes the poor sit on the floor. [2:1-3]

God had taught Peter through a pointed visual aid that he does not distinguish among, or prefer anyone over another, nor should his apostle. This is what the Epiphany Season is all about. **God Does Not Show Favoritism.** He calls all people to worship him in true devotion. He offers universal and secure peace in Christ.

The meeting between Peter and Cornelius, the Roman centurion, was no coincidence. Nor was their getting together a common occurrence. It was most unusual for a Jew to enter a Gentile's home and vice versa. It just was not done, except when God has a plan!

Their meeting came shortly after the Lord had shown Peter the vision of impure and unclean animals let down from heaven in something that looked like a large sheet. The apostle did not make the connection to sharing the gospel with Gentiles until the Lord sent him to Caesarea. God had told Peter, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

In Christ and by his saving redemptive work the Father had broken down divisions between impure and pure, between clean and unclean. This was true when it came to the dietary aspects of the ceremonial law. Peter realized it also applied to the former separation of Jews and Gentiles. Now the Word of God with its promise of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ would be shared en masse through mission work with all nations.

When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, he explained to Peter that an angel had appeared to him and told him to send for Peter. Now the Gentile centurion, his relatives and close friends were ready to hear all Peter had to tell them. The light went on in the apostle's head and heart. With genuine concern for all lost souls, and the memory of God's visual, the apostle began to speak, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."

Fearing God and doing what is right are the consequence of God's acceptance, not its cause. They are the fruits of the Holy Spirit's planting. To fear God is to trust in God and take God at his Word. It is to put God above all else. That fear works the obedience of love. Love for God is doing what is right according to God's will and command.

Fearing God and doing what is right are the marks of a child of God. We are not recognized by our race, or nationality or language. We are not recognized by mere outward acts of obedience

that may be masking an unbelieving heart; a pretense the Greeks called a hypocrites. Jesus defined these fruits to the Samaritan woman, also a Gentile, at the well, “when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth.” [St. John 4]

God calls all people to worship him in true devotion. True devotion comes from the heart of faith and hates sin and sinning. There is no one who does what is right and does not sin. None of us is free of our sinful nature and the body of death. Who will rescue us from these, whether we are Jew or Gentile? God does not show favoritism. “Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord.” [Romans 7] We enjoy a universal and secure peace in Christ.

Ask yourselves. Is there any greater evidence God does not play favorites than the fact he has chosen me to be his own? What if God played favorites and chose only those who were holy, or even those who were more holy than I? No, God does not show favoritism. He delivered me from sin and death because of Jesus’ holiness and sacrifice not because of who I am.

The phrase “play favorites” means literally “to look at faces.” God did not look at our faces and then choose us because we are attractive, or rich, or smart, or successful, or better than somebody else. He did not choose us because he saw in us some worth. One of the great myths among religious sayings is that Jesus died for me because I was worth dying for. Jesus died for me when I was not worth dying for.

Peter pointed Cornelius and his family and friends to Jesus’ baptism. Today is the Festival of the Lord’s baptism. John baptized Jesus “to fulfill all righteousness.” The Son of Man placed himself under the sinner’s baptism as part of his active obedience. The Father anointed his Son with the Spirit and with power to begin the public portion of his saving work, including Jesus performing miracles.

Epiphany is the season of miracles. Jesus did many miracles following his baptism to reveal his power and love for all. Jesus never turned away anyone. To those burdened by their sin, Jesus immediately spoke words of forgiveness. Those still confident in their own righteousness he called to contrition by showing them their sins.

Jesus brought universal and secure peace for one and all. God’s peace is universal because it comes to all in Christ without God playing favorites. God’s peace is secure because it does not lie with us but lies in Jesus Christ.

God gave Peter that message and he shared it. St. Luke records the results later in this chapter, “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. So Peter [he] ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” [45, 48] God will give us the opportunity not to play favorites with the gospel. Amen. <SDG>