

Those Whom God Favors

a sermon based on

Acts 10:24-43

and delivered on

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Baptism of the Lord Sunday (Year A)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Just nineteen days ago, we gathered in this place as we recalled that night when “the hopes and fears of all the years”¹ were met in Bethlehem when Jesus was born – when God became one of us. And what did that angel and the multitude of heavenly hosts say as they praised God in the midst of those shepherds keeping watch in the fields that night? “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Lk 2:14) Who are those whom God favors?

In the context of that night, we think of ordinary (maybe even poor folks); we think about shepherds and others who don’t have much. We think about the infirm and outcast like Bartimaeus whom Jesus healed (Mk 10:46) and Zacchaeus the short tax collector whom Jesus graced at his home. (Lk 19:5) Zacchaeus was rich, so maybe he doesn’t fit. Does he?

In that passage from Acts, Peter has gone to the home of Cornelius – a Roman centurion. That’s reasonably equivalent to a captain in the army, today. Unlike the Syrophenician (i.e. Canaanite/Palestinian) woman who pleaded with Jesus to heal her daughter out of her poverty (Mk 7:26-31), this gentile – this “outsider” would have been pretty well-off. He could afford to have his wife and children and slaves with him at his station. The only thing that stood in his way of God’s favor was his ethnicity – his race. It didn’t help that he was a Roman, but the main impediment to even getting to hear the good news of Jesus Christ was his race.

Let’s ponder that for a moment. Peter – the rock upon whom Jesus said he would build his church – and all the apostles didn’t even consider telling non-Jews about Jesus, even though they had seen him cast out the demon from that Syrophenician woman, even though they’d seen Jesus drive that legion of demons from the man at Gerasenes (Ger-ə-sē-nāz) – a gentile. (Mk 5:1-13) Even without any geographical insight, the mere presence of pig farmers tells us that this was not a place for Jews. Maybe they were willing to look past Jesus’ little *tete-a-tete* with that Samaritan woman because at least she was a daughter of Abraham.

In any case these were people who sought out and even pestered Jesus. Now Peter has gone to the home of a gentile. This is big stuff. So big that God gave him a pretty intense vision moments before the envoy arrived imploring him to go to Cornelius. (Acts 10:9-22) I think he was still reluctant. I say that because when he got to the house he said, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?” (Acts 10:28-29) Yeah, he said he came with no objection, but he’s obviously suspicious when he asks why he’d been invited.

That’s when Cornelius reveals that he – a gentile – had been praying to God when an angel appeared saying, “Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.” (Acts 10:31) God favored him, not because he was a Jew or a son of Abraham. God favored him, not because he couldn’t make it in the world on his own or because he was rich. God favored him not because he came from the right culture. God favored him because his prayers were heard and his alms remembered.

A week from tomorrow, kids will be out of school in honor of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We’ll be reminded of the dream he had – not on the roof of a building with images of every sort of animal and a command to kill and eat – but a dream when his “children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”²

In the passage that we hear today, Peter says “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34-35)

¹ Phillips Brooks “O Little Town of Bethlehem” 1868.

² King, Martin L. “I Have a Dream.” Speech presented at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, D.C., August 1968. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/mlk01.asp.

When Christian layman, Branch Rickey, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers decided to sign a certain second baseman to a minor league contract in 1945, and then bring him up to the bigs in 1947 it wasn't to just make a point – because Jackie Robinson would play hall of fame baseball. His career batting average of .311 was a phenomenal accomplishment. Branch Rickey favored Jackie Robinson because of how well he played baseball, and it helped him be a winner.

Those of us in this room only got to hear the good news that God loves us because Peter listened and realized that God's favor isn't based on where we are born, how much melanin our skin has, whether our hair is straight or curly, whether we were born with a silver spoon in our mouths or whether our crib was an animal trough God's favor rests on all those he fear him and who do what is acceptable.

What is acceptable isn't the things that trip us up so much. What's acceptable isn't that we dress in 2nd century roman garb. What's acceptable isn't that we sing only hymns or psalms or modern praise music. What's acceptable isn't even whether the choir sways and claps to a gospel chorus or whether they chant an ancient hymn.

What's acceptable **is** that we claim the promise of life that God offers us through Christ Jesus – the promise of one who was baptized not to wash away his sins, but to take on ours so that he could destroy them on the cross.

When Methodist E. Stanley Jones first went to India as a missionary preaching damnation and the need for repentance and telling people how much superior Christianity was to other religions, his ministry was a failure. When a Brahmin said to him, “I don't like the Christ of your creeds and churches,” he realized that he needed to quit preaching Christianity and to start preaching Christ. When he did, his ministry blossomed and flourishes yet today.³

We have good news in Jesus Christ. Don't get me wrong, I think the creeds are important. I believe how we worship matters – but it's about what we do rather than the form it takes.

One of the challenges we face with trying to live out the call to share the gospel is that we tend to focus on creeds. We may not say it that way, but we do – we focus and even fight among ourselves about beliefs and minutiae about things like how it is that the bread and wine convey Christ rather than just claiming the gift of his body and blood.

On a personal level we're reluctant to admit that sometimes we let the expectations of our culture distort our image of the kingdom of God. It's human nature – it's called ethnocentrism – the expectation that how we do things is the right way, because it works for us. The result is that even though we aspire to move beyond outright bigotry, that we're blinded to the insidious nature of racism in our communities and even in the church, expecting that because our own expressions work best for us, that they must be superior, when in fact, “the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart.” This God will not despise.

Here's the good news. It's okay to be you. It's okay if you want to dress up for church. It's okay if you want to shave your head or let your hair grow long. Unless it's only on one side so that you can do a comb over, that doesn't look good in any culture and it doesn't fool anybody. It's okay to choose to shave or to just let that beard come. It's okay dress in whatever modest clothing that you like. It's okay to listen to jazz, blue-grass, symphonies, hip-hop and heavy metal. It's okay speak a language that connects you to your heritage. These aren't the things that concern God. What concerns God is that we assent to his love for us.

When we accept that, it's easy to do what pleases him. When the Holy Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus and God's voice rang out from heaven saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with

³ Don R. Yocom, *Windows for Sermons: Stories and Humor for Inspired Preaching* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Pub, 2000) 75.

whom I am well pleased, ” (Matt. 3:16-17) Jesus hadn’t even begun his ministry. He hadn’t turned water into wine, cast out any demons, or healed any lepers. He hadn’t travelled throughout Judea and Galilee preaching the good news. What he had done is claimed his place among us so that we can know God’s love.

When Peter came to the realization that God shows no partiality in who should hear the gospel, he hadn’t yet seen the Holy Spirit come up on Cornelius and his house. That didn’t happen until after he told about Jesus’ love. That’s good news. We don’t have to convince anyone, we just get to share his love with all those whom he favors. AMEN.