

“God Plays No Favorites”

Baptism of Our Lord Sunday

Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus Ohio, The Baptism of our Lord, January 8, 2017 dedicated to all the babies and young children we baptized in 2016 and for those being born soon and baptized in 2017 – “Praise the Lord!” and always dedicated to the glory of God!

“God Plays No Favorites”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and our Salvation. Amen.

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Have you ever had someone in your life who bugs you? They get under your skin? The person represents everything you don't believe in and they have this way of not leaving you alone. You turn a corner and they are there. You go to the store, they are there. In the words of Carl Jung, they are “your shadow.”

If you are an athlete, she is not. If you are not athlete, his is a super jock. If you are super straight, she is super gay. If you

are 100% feminist, he is a 100% Chauvinist. If you are a “dyed-in-the-wool” Republican, she is an “over-the-top” Democrat. If you are “law and order” he is “peace and love.” If you are a labor leader, she is anti-union. If you are a Mac Person, he is into PC’s. Is anyone coming to mind for you? Anyone in your life?

But here is the “rub” as Shakespeare would say, “the person is really opposite – but really genuine, nice and compassionate and humble (of course not nearly as compassionate and humble as you). They irritate you most of all because they are kind and compassionate and ultimately mess up and break down all your stereotypes of what you have learned to “hate” about the other. In other words, they bug you so much, you like them a lot. In spite of all your differences, you are really good friends.

That is kind of what we find with Peter and Cornelius in today’s tenth chapter of Acts. Peter is a Jewish peasant from Galilee, a fisherman from the inland lake of the region, from a small town named Capernaum. Peter never left the lake until he met Jesus. With Jesus’ blessing, Peter is now the leader of the Christian movement and calls Jesus “Lord.” He is the #1 Christian “insider” of this new movement. He is despised by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and you can find his “wanted” poster in the post offices throughout the region (so to speak).

Meanwhile, Cornelius is a Roman Army Officer who is captain of the guard in the port city of Caesarea – where the Roman fleet in Palestine is based. He is a cosmopolitan Italian Gentile from the capitol city of the empire - Rome. He has seen the world battling his way across the Mediterranean Sea. He is “spiritual” but not religious. Officially, he calls Caesar “Lord.” Technically, he should be the one leading the hunt for the “wanted” man on the poster. By all rights, he is Peter’s worst nightmare. But that is not actually what the story tells us. What the story tells us is that Cornelius *“was a thoroughly good man. He had led everyone in his house to live worshipfully before God, was always helping people in need, and had the habit of prayer”* (Acts 10:2, The Message).

In Acts 10, the lives of Peter and Cornelius become intertwined forever. They both start having weird dreams and visions. The Holy Spirit brings them together as Cornelius asks to be baptized into Christian faith. But, Peter has never baptized an uncircumcised man. He has never, ever baptized the “enemy.” For all his talk about loving your enemy, he has never come face-to-face with a Roman leader who wants to be baptized into Christ. He wrestles mightily with this. But, in Acts 10:34-35, just before he baptizes Cornelius and his entire household, he declares, *“Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, one who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.”*

With these words and with Cornelius' baptism, Peter (the Rock) breaks out of his lifelong shell of Jewishness and becomes a new creation in Christ. It is Peter who is converted to Christ that day. Peter is changed. Peter turns around completely. There is no scriptural precedent for what Peter does. Until that very moment, God has shown a lot of partiality. God has a "chosen people," a "beloved son" and a Holy Spirit led movement of former Jews. Now, God has welcomed a Roman soldier into the family of faith! Guess who is coming to dinner! Wait 'til Peter explains this one to the other 11 apostles. Good luck Pete!

Let's dig a little deeper. If God shows no partiality, no prejudice, and truly respects all people and all creation, this declaration in Acts 10:34-35 has set in motion a Universal Faith! As Clement of Alexandria says in 175 AD, "This absence of respect of persons in God is not in time, it is from eternity." In other words, this inclusion is for all eternity. It is for all time. It breaks the boundaries of historical revelation. Paul goes to Athens after Peter and welcomes all the Athenians to Christ. He says, "We are ALL indeed his offspring" (Acts 17:28-29). Being God's offspring affirms the equality and unity of all humanity. This is an affirmation that supersedes any silly and contentious attempts by Christians through the ages to keep ANYONE out of the faith or declare them judged by God. Are you following me? That's right – this statement

EVEN allows straight, white heterosexual men to be Christians. This is good news for some of us in the room! I am accepted as one in Christ! Of course, if you are a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender Christian, you already knew this! ☺
Right?

The advocates of strict Christocentrism will sometimes argue that the Bible does not teach the Universal love of God. They say you have to come to faith ONLY through Jesus Christ. They are wrong according to Acts and the First Council of Nicea in 325 AD said, that “We believe in ONE God, Father ALL powerful, Maker of ALL THINGS seen and unseen.” This phrase of the Nicene Creed embraces not only all humanity but all creation, under the One God, creator of ONE Creation. There is nothing here that excludes anyone and any creature from the embrace of God’s love and grace (Jaroslav Pelikan, Acts, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005, pp. 131-132).

So how did our One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church end up where we are today? Father Richard Rohr a Franciscan priest from New Mexico, in Falling Upward, reflects on inclusion or in his words, the “divine economy of God’s grace” with this:

“In the divine economy of grace, sin and failure become the base metal and raw material for the redemption experience itself. Much of organized religion, however, tends to be peopled by folks

*who have a mania for some ideal order, which is never true, so they are seldom happy or content. It makes you anal retentive after a while, to use Freud's rude phrase, because you can never be happy with life as it is, which is always filled with handicapped people, mentally unstable people, people of "other" and "false" religions, irritable people, gay people, and people of totally different customs and traditions. Not to speak of **wild** nature, which we have not loved very well up to now. Organized religion has not been known for its inclusiveness or for being very comfortable with diversity. Yet pluriformity, multiplicity, and diversity is the ONLY world there is! It is rather amazing that we can miss, deny or ignore what is in plain sight everywhere" (Richard Rohr, Falling Upward, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2011, p. 60).*

Our passage today in Acts 10:34-43 is truly a transformational text. Did you know this text is read every Easter Sunday? It is read in Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches across the globe – all too many of whom have shown tremendous partiality against their own LGBT sons and daughters. In all too many cases our congregations have also shown partiality against folks who struggle with mental illness, disabilities and hunger for food and righteousness. I believe this is God's cosmic sense of humor to present a text, which calls us into true relationship with God and one another. I don't know about you, but I smile each Easter when I read the text. Because Peter – the First Pope of

our Catholic Church – laid down the groundwork for inclusion that should never, ever, ever have been challenged and changed. His God-given, Holy Spirit driven, recognition of inclusion is our foundational bedrock on which to stand with Christ Jesus our Lord! There is no prejudice, no partiality, no divisions, no separation. We are one!

On this Baptism of our Lord Sunday, Jesus went down into the muddy waters of the Jordan River to be baptized by John. **He is our inspiration and our Savior.** He went into the river when the river banks were teeming with sinners - faulty, sorry, guilty human beings - who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around. If you have ever read the arrest record in the newspaper, then you know the kinds of things they were guilty of - drunk driving, (mail fraud), bad checks, petty larceny, assault. (Some were poor and had come because they had been told by priests that their poverty was caused by something wrong inside of them). Some were notorious sinners and some were there for crimes of the heart known only to themselves, but none of them had illusions of their own innocence. They had come to be cleaned. They knew they were dirty." (Barbara Brown Taylor, Home by Another Way, pp. 33-34).

Jesus showed up and got in line with them. He wasn't famous. No one knew anything about him. He hadn't committed any miracles yet. He hadn't saved humanity yet. He

simply stood in line waiting his turn. John recognized him as he entered the water. To the rest of the newly redeemed and waiting unredeemed sinners by the river, it looked like they were just talking. But, attention was drawn to Jesus as he emerged from the waters with the heavens torn apart, a dove descending upon him, with a voice clearly saying from heaven, "This is my son, the Beloved One, in whom I am well pleased." (Ibid).

When he got out the water, all the wet and redeemed around him, and all the not yet wet and unredeemed, too - must have wondered who in the world he was and what he was doing there. He was about to rock their world forever!

Today, you got wet and redeemed once again! You get to answer for yourself who in the world he is and what he is doing here! In the Spirit of Christ, In the power of the Holy Spirit, let's all come to the table of our Lord and then go and serve Him knowing that our God shows no partiality, no prejudice and no separation between any of us. We are called to do the same. And when you meet your nemesis at work or school this week, know that God is smiling on both of you. God is loving both of you. God plays no favorites. So, figure it out. You can smile and love the Cornelius or the Peter in your life, too! Amen.

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