

Sermon Reading: Acts 10:34-38

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

Sermon Theme: God Was With Him Means God Is With Us

Even when we know there are so many good choices, we all have our favorites. Certain things we simply prefer over others. You might have your favorite spot to sit in the house and no one better take it. You have that favorite shirt you put on and shoes that fit just right. You have your go-to meal or favorite snack to munch on. You have your favorite sports team where you won't miss a game or your favorite show you look forward to watching. You may have a preferred model of vehicle. Others prefer a certain pet. Sometimes we have heated debates on why our favorite is better than someone else's favorite. But, more often than not, it's not that big of a deal.

Other times having a favorite is not always the best. Teachers will be adamant that they do not have a favorite student. But you know better. You can probably still think of someone from school who seemed to receive special treatment. If you grew up with brothers and/or sisters—mom and dad would deny it—but it seemed like someone could do no wrong. You see it in the workplace where certain people get the better shifts and hours. You see it in society where certain people from certain areas that grow up in certain homes seem to have it easier in life. Because it is so prevalent and obvious in so many situations, having favorites seems to be a simple fact of life. But then Peter says in Acts 10 that God does not show favoritism. Really?

This would have come as shock in Peter's day too. Starting with their Father Abraham God had chosen the people of Israel, the Jews, to be his own. From this group God promises he will send a Savior to save the world. And, so, God protects this group of people with special Laws he puts in place. From the food they eat to how and who they worship, it was quite clear this group of people is set apart. It was quite obvious especially when it is against their law to eat or associate with non-Jewish people, Gentiles.

But the Jews had taken this to the next degree. They knew they were God's chosen people. So, they took that to mean God rejected everyone who was not a Jew. For many, they saw themselves as God's favorite. Because they were Jews—had the blood of

Abraham in their veins—many believed heaven was already theirs. It didn't matter too much what they did or how they acted; they were already God's favorite.

So I have to imagine this must have been an awkward situation in Acts 10 because people knew this was how the Jews acted. So, here you have a Jew—Peter—coming into this house filled with non-Jews, Gentiles. From an outside point of view the Jews seem to think they were better than everyone else when they separated themselves from other people. And so other nations didn't always like the Jews or want to associate with them either.

And, really, we shouldn't be too surprised. Think about how we act when either we know that we are the favorites or someone else is the favorite and we are not. Pride rears its ugly head. Jealousy quickly follows. It's difficult enough when we see that in society or family, but more than one person has commented about the apparent favoritism in church. And what happens? Divisions rise up. People walk away feeling left out. You try and say otherwise. But, when you aren't the favorite and you are left on the outside looking in, it hurts.

But how do you view your relationship with God? You wouldn't be so bold to say you were God's favorite. But the way we live and act can seem like we think we have some special favor with God because of who we are and what we have done. At least that's what it looks like when you seem to act as if it's not that big of a deal if you don't take someone's words and actions in the kindest possible way because at least you are in church. You may feel validated that you hold onto that grudge because you're still a Lutheran and they did hurt you. It's okay to lose my temper and patience because you go to church when you can. It's okay for me to grumble and complain about how someone else is acting because I try to do better. No, you wouldn't say you are God's favorite. But shouldn't he be impressed with what I am doing for him?

Then there is the other side of the coin. You know what you've done. You know how you are still struggling against that sin. Not only do you know you couldn't be God's favorite, you may even wonder if God really loves you. So you might try and convince yourself that you need to or should try to do something to get in his good graces. You need to feel sorrier for what you've done. You have to make yourself miserable reminding yourself and dwelling on how you have failed. You need to follow these steps so that you feel like you have done enough. Only then can you have God's love.

We may say that we know we are all equal in God's sight. But it's hard to believe when other people's lives are better than mine. We can say that God does not show favoritism. But it's hard to believe when other people suffer worse than me. And so the way we get around that is we rank sins, people, and actions—they must have done or not done

something and that's why everything is the way it is—because that makes sense to us. It also plays to our pride that wants to point out: at least you didn't do *that*.

But where we want to see different levels of what I have done or could do to be God's favorite, God sees one equal plain. Not one is better than the other. In fact, all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. So that means also that a sin is a sin. It's difficult for us to get our minds wrapped around the fact that someone cheating on their spouse is just as sinful and damning in God's sight as someone who willfully stays away from church. Losing control of your temper and patience is just as sinful and damning in God's sight as physical abuse. No, God does not see different levels that someone is a little better than another or someone is more favored than the next. He sees all equally lost. All equally dead in sin.

Understand correctly when God chooses Israel he isn't picking favorites. Not everyone can do everything. One Savior needed to be born to save the world. One person needs to be born from one group of people. It's not favoritism. It's getting a job done. And God works to teach Peter this truth. When he brings Peter into this house full of non-Jews he is showing Peter that those Old Testament Laws that separated the Jews from the non-Jews, they no longer apply. God does not show favoritism. God did not want to save only the Jews. No, Peter says in v. 35, God, **“Accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”**

But how do we get to that point? By nature we do not fear God. We despise and defy him. By nature we are God's enemies who do not want to listen to him. By nature we do not do what is right. We do what we think is right and what serves me. Even our kindest, loving, caring actions by nature drip with disgusting sin.

And that's why Jesus is standing at the edge of the Jordan River. He's right next to cheaters and liars. He stands with the prideful and conceited. He stands with those drowning in despair over their sin. Jesus does not play favorites. Jesus counts himself among all the lost in sin—including people like you and me—to be baptized. John the Baptizer doesn't think Jesus needs it. Jesus had done and would never do anything wrong. But Jesus tells him and us: he came to fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). So, with the voice of the Father reassuring him and the Holy Spirit descending as a dove, Jesus is baptized receiving the Holy Spirit and power. It's not that Jesus had lost his powers as true God at some point between being born and this baptism. No, Jesus is the Word who was with God in the beginning. God continues to be with His Son and Jesus continues to be true God when he takes on flesh and dwells among us. But during his time among us on this earth Jesus would not make full use of his power as true God. And so Jesus depends on the Holy Spirit to complete his task. Jesus goes about doing good and healing all those under the power of the devil because God was with him.

This is the message of peace that God shares with you. This peace isn't a peace that there will be no more wars. This peace isn't that there will be no more fighting amongst our family members and friends. This peace isn't referring to a quiet where we won't face the terrors of this world. It's the peace revealed to you in your Savior Jesus who is like you. He struggles against temptation. He suffers our weaknesses. He is baptized just as we need to be. He relies on the Spirit's power to do what is good and right. At the same exact time, he has to be True God so that when he is tempted he never falls into sin. When he dies, his death would be counted as your own and death to your sin. His rising from the dead means life for you. Jesus doesn't just do his part and now you need to do the rest to be God's favorite. With his perfect life fearing God and doing right, with his baptism, with his death and rising from the dead, Jesus fulfills all the work to make you right with God. Sins are paid in full. The stain of sin is washed away. You are at one with the Father and have peace with God. Peace that you don't have to face the terrors of the world alone—God is with us. Peace that all is well between you and the Father. Peace that Jesus is still with you in the Bible and Lord's Supper. Peace that the war against sin, death, and hell has been won for you by Jesus.

And that's what you receive at your own baptism. Because Jesus shares in the same flesh and blood, Jesus is your brother who doesn't keep the gifts of the Spirit to himself. As God anoints Jesus with the Spirit at his Baptism so Jesus shares and pours out the Spirit with his gifts on you at your baptism. It's that same Spirit who works in you and through you producing good fruit that is pleasing to God making you right in his sight. So now God accepts you into his family. He smiles upon you and gives you his favor not because of who you are and what you can do. But for Jesus' sake who stands in your place, who is baptized in the Jordan River to save you, God is already well-pleased with you. Amen.