

Playing Favorites

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: A couple weeks ago (since I switched the readings around the last two Sundays), we began to look at the General Letter of St. James to the Christian Church. And what we saw is that James is very much concerned that we who confess the name of Christ with our mouths also confess him with our actions. A true and living faith in Christ naturally produces the good fruits of faith. “You believe in God?” asks James, “You believe in Jesus? Well, so do the demons—but they’re still demons, and they act like it.” Theirs is a dead faith. We on the other hand, professing ourselves to be followers of Jesus, should want to cultivate in ourselves the sort of Christ-like attitudes and behaviors that show that Christ is indeed living in us. With this in mind, the specific subject we heard James take on today is the sin of showing favoritism. To illustrate his point, he gives an example that I’ve taken the liberty of updating just a bit.

Suppose some fine Sunday morning you’re the designated greeter. It’s your job to receive people at the door and especially to welcome and help orient visitors to our church: let them know that we’re glad they came and answer any questions they might have. Now, as you’re dutifully carrying out the assigned task, you notice two cars that turn into the parking lot. The first is the latest model Hummer: shiny, jet black with all the chrome appointments. No one is ever going to take it off the road and go four-wheeling in it, that’s for sure. It’s a vehicle that just screams of its owner, “I have so much money that I really don’t know what to do with all.” The second car is the rusted remains of a ’74 Chevy Vega. It is literally held together with bailing wire. Its engine doesn’t exactly run, you can’t say that; it’s more of a continuous bad cough. The vehicle is shrouded in a cloud of black smoke that escapes not so much from the tailpipe as from any number of other orifices that clearly were not part of its original design. It staggers weakly into a parking place and when the driver shuts it off, it shudders violently and then hacks and wheezes a while before coming to what sounds like its last gasp. Okay. From the Hummer there emerges the ideal American family: Dad, Mom, and the statistically correct 2.3 children. They are all impeccably dressed in their Sunday morning finery, and together they just exude an atmosphere of honor and dignity. Meanwhile, after unhitching the external wire latch and exerting considerable pushing effort, the Vega’s passenger door sags open. Out tumbles a teenaged boy who seems to have taken his fashion ideas from Edward Scissorhands. He looks sullen and disinterested. He’s obviously here against his will. He is followed by a harried and haggard-looking woman who had to climb across the console to escape the condemned vehicle through the only working door. She is the boy’s mother or possibly his grandmother. It’s hard to tell which – she seems old beyond her years. Her simple dress is clean but faded and worn. It fits her poorly. Who knows, you think to yourself, maybe it fit better on one of its previous owners.

All right, you’ve taken all this in now and you’ve come to some conclusions. You think, “Now, this Hummer family is exactly the kind of people we need attending this church.” So, when they come in through the door you pour on the charm. You greet them warmly and subtly begin to talk up the church a bit. You let them know that you’d like to see them again *real* soon. On the other hand, you’ve decided that the Vega family is probably not going to feel at home around here. When you tell them, “We’re glad to meet you” it sounds more like a question than a statement. You tell them how surprised you are that they came; we so rarely get visitors, you know, what with all the problems we’re having around here. You know, maybe in the future you’d be more comfortable at the Baptist church. I hear things are really moving and shaking over there.

Now, maybe you’re thinking that all that was overstated, and I’m willing to admit that it was; but only to demonstrate the point. If you could picture in your mind what I was attempting to illustrate, then I’ll bet you found yourself naturally gravitating toward one family and away from the other. That’s the favoritism that James is talking about. You don’t know these people, you haven’t even met them; but based on your observations you’d prefer one group to the other – and even if you might not act out on it and display the preference like I described, the underlying feeling itself is the problem. It’s favoritism; and it’s wrong. It isn’t nice to play favorites ... *or is it?*

As I examined this text, I got to thinking, “Wait a minute. James is telling us not to do exactly what God does all the time”. The Lord’s predilection for showing favoritism to certain individuals or groups of people is a major theme throughout the Bible. Think about it: starting all the way back in Genesis, we read that the Lord preferred the sacrifice of Abel to that of his brother Cain. Now, they both brought sacrifices: Cain brought the first-fruits of his work as a farmer, and Abel brought a lamb from his work as a shepherd. The Lord looked them over and said, “I like this but not that.” We know how it turned out too. Cain didn’t appreciate the Lord’s favoritism, and in a jealous rage he murdered his brother. But that doesn’t end it. As the story continues, and with Abel now permanently out of commission, the Lord shifts his favor to another of Cain’s brothers named Seth.

And it keeps on going that way. Just a couple chapters later we read that the whole world is a mess. The Lord looks down from heaven and sees that everyone has gone corrupt. There is no one, we’re told—not a single person on the face of the earth who is not constantly sinning from moment he or she is born. The Lord decides to wipe everyone out – and yet he chooses to place his favor on a man named Noah. And let me make it clear that it wasn’t because Noah was somehow less sinful than his neighbors. Regarding *all* people the Lord had already said that the thoughts and inclinations of their hearts were only evil all the time—and that includes Noah. And yet, because Noah was God’s favorite, he was saved with his family in the ark.

A few chapters later, after many years have passed and the whole world had again become corrupt and the people had slipped into one form of idolatry or another, we’re told that the Lord decided to give his favor to man named Abram whom he later renamed Abraham. And just so there’s no doubt, let’s be clear about this again: before God called him, Abram was worshipping idols with everyone else. And yet one day the Lord came knocking and told him, “I’ve chosen you, Abram, and I’ve decided to make your name great. I’m going to make of you a great nation, and through you I’m going to bless all the families on earth.”

Abram said (and I’m paraphrasing now), “Sounds pretty good to me” and off he went to look over the land that the Lord had promised to give him as part of the deal. And what we see as the story continues is one example of favoritism after another. After some time, Abram has a son he names Ishmael. Abram loves Ishmael and wants him to be the one who will inherit the promise God made to him. But the Lord comes along and says, “No, I don’t want him. I’ll give you another son. He will be the one who receives my special blessing.” That son eventually is born, and he’s named Isaac. Then, later, Isaac has two sons: twins named Esau and Jacob. Though Isaac prefers Esau, the rugged outdoorsman, the Lord favors Jacob – whom we find out is a bit on the shady side. What happens in the next generation is a veritable smorgasbord of favoritism. Jacob has two wives named Leah and Rachel. He hates Leah and gives his whole heart to Rachel. Meanwhile, the Lord is favoring Leah by giving her many sons and preventing Rachel from conceiving at all. After a long while, Rachel finally bears a son. He’s named Joseph – and Jacob, his father, loves him more than all his other sons put together. But as we read on, we find that the Lord’s favorite is Judah, one of the sons of the despised Leah.

Incidentally it’s from Judah that we derive the word “Jews”, and we know that as a nation they were God’s chosen people – the people he favored above all others. And so it goes right on down through the generations. When it comes time to choose a king, the Lord places his favor on a man named Saul – a fellow who outwardly appears to be the ideal choice: tall, handsome, intelligent, and quite humble. But things don’t work out so well with him. So later, the Lord shifts his favor to a shepherd boy named David; and to get to him, he passes over David’s seven older and seemingly more qualified brothers. There doesn’t seem to be any method or pattern in the Lord’s choices. This becomes even clearer in the next generation. David has many sons by seven different wives and at least fifteen concubines. The question is who will be the next king? There are many good options; but of all the possible choices, the Lord’s favor falls on the one who was the second son of the wife David acquired after he had an illicit affair with her and then had her husband murdered. Talk about a doubtful pedigree...

Skipping ahead to the time of the New Testament, we find that the Lord chose to place his favor a young maiden named Mary. He picks her out of only he knows how many other eligible Jewish women, and has the angel say to her, “*You* are greatly favored in the eyes of the Lord.” And so she was, for she was chosen by God to bear his Son and bring him into the world in the flesh.

So what are we to make of all of this? In example after example we see the Lord clearly favoring certain individuals over others. He plays favorites. But then, through James, he says, “Don’t *you* do that.” What’s the deal?

Well, to begin with, we need to know that the Scripture uses a couple different words that we translate into English as *favor* or *favoritism*. The word that James uses in this morning’s passage can literally be translated “to receive faces” or “to welcome faces”. The idea is that you base your welcome for someone upon their outward appearance. You assign them a value on a scale in your mind based upon what you see. If what you see is appealing, they get a high score and you treat them nice. If what you see turns you off, they get a low score and you don’t feel the need to exert yourself so much. And we can get a little more specific here. When all is said and done, what determines whether we view someone positively or negatively has to do mostly with what we perceive the person might have to offer. The big question is: Is this person likely to be an asset or a liability to me? And we make snap judgments based on appearances – or perhaps on other information we might know about them. In the example given before, we perceive that a rich person is likely to share some of that wealth. It’ll take some of the burden off the rest of us if they become part of our fellowship. So it’s, “Sit down, and make yourself at home”. The poor person, on the other hand, is perceived as being likely to become just another burden upon us. And we sure don’t need any more of those. The point is that ultimately, it’s our own selfishness that’s driving our thinking. And that’s why this kind of favoritism is so wrong. It’s driven by our sinful love of self above all others.

God’s favoritism is different. Obviously, it’s not based on outward appearance. We’ve already seen that. Going through the Bible, there doesn’t seem to be any discernable pattern as to why he chooses one person over another. And the mistake people often make is to assume that since he doesn’t seem to show his preference on outward things, it must be that he does so based on something he sees within them. The idea is that God sees into the heart and decides to place his special favor upon those who are predisposed to doing good and serving him. They are more spiritual than others, perhaps, or somehow less inclined toward sin. The truth is that the Lord himself emphatically denies this. Speaking to the nation of Israel the Lord says in book of Deuteronomy, “Do you suppose that it was because you are more righteous than the other nations, and that’s why I chose to put my favor on you? Think again. That’s not it.” In fact, it seems at times that the Lord goes out of his way to place his favor on those who are manifestly less qualified in any spiritual or moral sense.

And *that’s* the point. God distributes his favor based upon his grace, his love, and his mercy. It has nothing to do with anything about the receiver of his favor and everything to do with his own gracious heart. He’s not in it for himself. He’s in it for you and me. And that really is the purpose of showing us example after example of his placing his favor on certain individuals over and above what seem to be more qualified candidates. They all point to the ultimate display of his favoritism: when he took the One who was truly righteous, his only begotten Son, the only One who was truly serving him and worthy of his favor – and he rejected him in favor of you. He placed your sins upon him and damned him in your place so that he could play favorites with you.

And you have been favored. The vast majority of you were blessed with Christian parents who raised you in Christian homes. While you were yet infants, the Lord placed his favor on you in the water of Holy Baptism. When that happened, he called you out of this dark and dying world and he put his mark on you saying, “You. I’ve chosen you. I’m calling you by name and making you my own child. I’m washing away your sins in the blood of my Son. For his sake, you are now among my favorites.” For some of us, of course, it happened later in life; but in many cases this only *highlights* the favoritism God showed. People who were spiritually far off were called near by God and given the same grace he showed to those born naturally into the family. And still today, the Lord continues to bless us with his gracious favor. In his Word and Sacraments he comes here each week to assure us that we are still his favorites – that despite our unworthiness and our sin, for the sake of his Son he still forgives and he still loves us. In fact, we are especially favored to be part of a fellowship in which this simple message is kept front and center, and in which the saving Gospel is kept so clear and pure. You really are God’s favorites; the trouble is that we are so used to God’s favoritism for us that we don’t even think about it most of the time.

In this morning's text, St. James tells us not to play favorites – and he's right, of course: it's wrong the way we normally do it. And so it's appropriate that we examine ourselves and see how we have been guilty of this in the past – and that we remain aware of it because if we're honest, we'll see that it keeps happening all the time. That should only prove to us how sinful and selfish we really are. And it should lead us to confess and repent – and even more to appreciate the favoritism God has for us that we do not deserve. And then, having confessed and received again our Lord's forgiveness, let's resolve to play favorites the way he does. In mercy he sees us not as we are, either externally or internally; but rather for Jesus' sake he sees us as those he favored above his Son and for whom he gave his Son to die. That's how we should see each other—and not just those of us here in the church, but all people. They are all God's favorites because he gave his Son for all. The trouble is most of them don't know it. So let's play God's favorites, so that through our words and actions they may come to discover this amazing and life-giving truth. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!