

“Series: Practicing Our Faith”
“Favorites”

I served a number of years as a camp counselor at our United Methodist Church camps. Most often I would do Jr. Hi camp. They would have a male counselor and a female counselor in charge of maybe 12-15 kids, and that was our family group. One year when I was at Camp Innabah, near Pottstown, my co-counselor partner told me how the girls in our group were beginning to show favorites, and this was causing some bad feelings among the girls. Did I know any Bible verses that related to that? Well, I thought of Romans 2:11, “For there is no respect of persons with God”, and shared that with her. A better translation is: “God does not show favoritism.”

Favoritism! Favoritism can be defined as: “Preferential attitude and treatment of a person or group over another having equal claims and rights.”

Now showing favoritism isn’t limited to Jr. Hi campers, is it! A lot of our human interactions are laced with favoritism. I’ll bet you can think of illustrations of favoritism – playing favorites. Maybe in school. At work. In your family. As you think of examples, maybe you still feel pain, or anger, because you were on the short end of somebody favoring someone else over you.

It certainly happens in schools, in the classroom. I can think of teachers who had their favorites. The old “teacher’s pet” thing. My 10th grade biology teacher was the high school football coach. He would give a classroom assignment, or let his student teacher teach, and be in another room looking at film of the football games. You can guess who his favorite students were – right, members of the football team!

One adult reflects back, “In my school a kid got put into the top class despite his grades being very bad. He was a relative of the school board chairman.” Sometimes the favoritism in a school setting is laughable. One person recalls: “Way back in elementary school, I had three classmates...whose mothers handled all of our classroom parties. We always had an egg hunt around Easter. The three students who found the most eggs won chocolate bunnies. We had about thirty kids in our class, and all of us were to bring in three eggs to be hidden. The teacher would pull down the window shades so we couldn’t look outside to see where the moms hid the eggs on the playground. Every year, from kindergarten through 6th grade, those three classmates always found the most eggs, up to a dozen each usually, while the rest of us rarely found more than one or two. Some never found any. The girls eventually confessed that their moms told them they would hide piles of eggs behind specific trees near the doors while telling the whole class, “The eggs can be anywhere on the playground!” One year, a boy found an egg that would have put his total in the running to get a chocolate bunny; he was told it didn’t count because the moms didn’t “remember hiding that one”, so the bunny went to (one of the mom’s girls).

Favoritism happens in sports activities. Coaches have their favorites. Our daughter Karin’s boys all play baseball. She shares stories of “daddy-ball”, where if a dad is coach of the team, or helps out, his son gets preference in playing time, and pick of the positions he wants to play.

It happens on the job, at work. Bosses who are more lenient with some workers, or give

promotions or pay raises to their golfing pals or drinking buddies. Or the pretty young secretary who gets treated nicer than the older employee who is much more proficient in the job.

It happens in families. I saw an article, where 15 people pointed out the worst case of favoritism they could think of, and almost all of them told of something *in their family*. Some felt a parent or their parents favored one of the other children, not them. And you could still sense the pain and anger they were feeling. Maybe *you* look back and feel a brother or sister was favored over you. (Or maybe you realize *you* were the favored child!).

It happens in the ordinary situations of life. When we lived near Media (PA), there was this sub shop, “Tiny Tim’s”. They had dollar hoagies - and they were good. But I hated to go in there. They were really nice....to the ladies, especially the attractive young girls who came in. But, to me – a middle age guy back then – they weren’t always so pleasant!

Now, having “favorites” in itself is not bad. We can have our favorite kind of music, our favorite foods or restaurants, our favorite movies or TV shows, our favorite place to vacation, etc. But it’s when our playing favorites treats people unfairly, or hurts others, that it becomes a destructive thing.

When you take this theme of favoritism, and stretch it and expand it to cover *society at large*, you get into the realm of *social injustice*. Where certain groups, certain segments of society, are getting the short end of the stick, and being treated unfairly. The “isms” – racism, sexism, ageism. So much of what is happening in current events and the political arena has to do with *favoritism*. Showing preferential treatment to certain groups, while denying others their rights and benefits.

Well, what about the church? Is there favoritism and partiality in our churches? You would think – and hope – that the church ought to be a place where we don’t get into this business of playing favorites. What do you think? Do *pastors* have their favorites in the congregation? (Jeepers, I hope not). Someone’s a big giver in the church (money wise), and you cater to this person’s views and wishes because you don’t want to risk losing their financial contributions. Someone is allowed to get away with unchristian behaviors simply because they’ve been a church member for 50 years, or are a bank president or owner of a local business. I can think of one situation where we had a very gifted musical director, but you could tell she had her favorites in the choir, and wasn’t quite as demanding on them as the rest of the singers.

Well, all of this is a rather long way of setting the stage for our next sermon from the Letter of James. Turn to James, chapter 2. James writes, “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?”(James 2:1). I like the NIV translation: “My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.”

Here, James connects *faith* with *favoritism*. He says, the way you’re showing such favoritism, are you really a believer in our Lord Jesus Christ! Then he points out what they are doing

wrong. “For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here in a good place, please,’ while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there,’ or, ‘Sit by my footstool,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” (James 2:2-4).

Some rich person in designer clothes comes through the door, and you make a fuss over them, pamper them, walk them to the best seats, while a poor person comes in wearing consignment-shop clothes, and you ignore them or treat them like dirt. James says you’ve discriminated among yourselves “and become judges with evil thoughts.” This is wrong, he says. Evil!

He goes on: “Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?” (James 2:5). He says, hasn’t God chosen some of the poor of the world to have the greatest faith? How can you treat these precious people of God so badly just because they’re poor!

Apparently, some rich people were creating problems, and they were overlooking that! “But you have dishonored the poor person. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into the courts? ⁷ Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?” (verses 6-7).

James then reemphasizes the seriousness of showing partiality: “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well. But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (verses 8-9). This is no minor issue! “Oh well, we just have our favorites. That’s life.” You are violating that great command of Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself!”

The Letter of James is not the only part of the Bible that warns against favoritism. Leviticus 19:15 commands, “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.” 2 Chronicles 19:7 says, “Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery.” The Apostle Paul advised the young pastor Timothy: “I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions *without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism*” 1 Timothy 5:21. Romans 2:11 is plain and straightforward: “God does not show favoritism.”

It’s not surprising, since Jesus was God, to find Jesus treating all people fairly. Even those who attacked Jesus realized that He did not favor people just because they were rich or powerful. The religious leaders came to Jesus to trap Him with a trick question. “And they came and said to him, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth’ (Mark 12:14).

People were loved and valued by Jesus whether they were rich or poor, skinny or fat, in the limelight or a loner, outgoing and articulate or lacking in social graces and charm, religious or irreligious, morally pure or of questionable morals.

The remedy for this favoritism is to be like Jesus, and to love people like Jesus loved them.
Agape – love. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love people, embrace people, accept people by not just judging them from outward appearance, or accepting them based on our own prejudices.

It's so easy for our biases to come into play in how we treat people. It's interesting, the Greek word translated "favoritism" literally means "*to receive the face.*" We judge people at face value. We treat people without looking deeper. Playing favorites, just doesn't mix with faith, or Christian love!

I believe the church should be a shining light that the world needs to see, when it comes to treating people fairly, and with respect. We're certainly not there yet. It's tough! The first days of the church presented that problem, too. Most of the first converts to Christianity were Jews – Jewish Christians. And they tended to despise Gentiles.

There's a wonderful story in Acts 10, where God arranges a meeting between Peter, and Cornelius (a Gentile, a Roman centurion). Peter winds up going into the home of this Gentile (Jewish law forbade that). And the Holy Spirit falls on those in that Gentile home. Peter, astounded, says, "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" (Acts 10:34-35). We're still working at learning that truth today, aren't we?

I think in some ways the Church is a place where we do not show partiality. I look at this congregation, and reflect back over the churches I've served. People have been valued and respected, regardless of their social status, or income, the kind of car they drive and the cost of the clothes they wear. I can't ever remember an instance of our filling a vacancy or planning a program or ministry where it even came up how much a person earned, or whether or not they had a college degree. And I would hope that whoever might come into this church as a visitor or guest would be welcomed, no matter what their outward appearance would be like.

This is not to say we're perfect. We're far from it. But hopefully we're learning, day by day, week by week, year by year, that God plays no favorites, and neither should we.

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