

“God Plays No Favorites!”

Psalm 29; Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 313-17

The Baptism of the Lord, January 12, 2014

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

“If Jesus was Jewish, why aren’t we?” That was the question a confirmand asked me Tuesday, literally as class was dismissed and they were walking out the door. In fact, they returned to ask the question. Conscious that it was a cold night and a parent was waiting, I said *“Wow, that is a question with a complex answer. I’ll answer it in Sunday’s sermon.”*

So here we go. So stay with me because it will lead us to this scriptural declaration, *“God Plays No Favorites!”*

“Jewishness” is religious AND cultural. Some Christians ARE Jewish as defined by culture. Some Christians, most commonly groups like *“Messianic Jews”* and *“Jews for Jesus,”* self-identify as Jewish; including some folks in our church.

Throughout Hebrew scripture is the promise of a *“Messiah,”* a Hebrew word describing the one whom God will send to redeem Creation and establish justice and righteousness. Christians sometimes use the word *“Christ,”* which is the same concept in the Greek language. Today’s reading from Isaiah is one of the prophecies about the Messiah. Called the *Servant Songs of Isaiah* (which we will hear on the Sundays throughout January), they offer God’s promise of salvation through the Messiah.

As Jesus’ adult ministry of teaching and healing spread, more and more people began to believe he was the promised Messiah. But not all believed, and Jesus’ ultimate death came about because he challenged the religious status quo and was seen as a threat by the Roman government, who was responsible for his crucifixion.

But Jewish followers of Jesus witnessed his resurrection and were convinced that his victory over death confirmed his identity as the promised Messiah. As long as those who believed were Jewish, everyone knew who was “in” and who was “out.” You kept kosher, followed the rules of Judaism, and believed in Jesus as the Savior of Israel and of all who believed.

Ay, but there was the rub. What if those who believed Jesus was Messiah were not culturally Jewish? What if they didn’t keep kosher? What if they didn’t know the Ten Commandments? What if they didn’t know the Shema, posted on the doorpost of every Jewish home in a mezzuzah (“*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One*”, *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*” Deut. 6:4-5) And that is exactly what began to happen. First, the disciple Philip met, instructed and baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts, chapter 8: a non-Jewish person (which is called a Gentile, as are most of us) and another story for another day.

But then came St. Peter. Today’s reading from Acts 10 is the culmination of Peter’s vision. Non-kosher animals, animals FORBIDDEN to Jews by Jewish law, came down to him on a sheet and a voice declared “Rise, Peter, kill and eat.” Peter replied “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” But the voice replied “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happened three times.

Meanwhile (back at the ranch, as we sometimes say), there was a Gentile (a non-Jew) name Cornelius, a respected army officer and what Jews called a “God-fearer:” in other words, a non-Jew respectful of their religion and seeking God. Cornelius also had a vision in which God instructed him to send for Peter, even though he had never met Peter (as far as we know). As an officer he was used to giving orders. He sent two of his slaves and a trusted soldier to round up Peter.

So that brings us to today's reading. Peter, the devout Jew who has faithfully observed the rules and never eaten a non-kosher animal, is being asked (ordered, really) to step into the home of a Gentile. Because of his vision that nothing God has made is unclean, he does. But he still doesn't know why he's there. So Cornelius shares HIS dream, which had commanded him to summon Peter, even though he didn't know why. So he says, in effect, "Please tell us what the Lord has commanded you to say."

And that is where Peter makes this startling affirmation; and why most of us are not Jewish but we ARE Christian; and why the Christian Church stopped being a Jewish sub-group and became a world-wide church, for all people in every age and time: *"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."* Or, as Eugene Petersen says in his popular scripture paraphrase called The Message: *"God plays no favorites!"*

Now the story wasn't over there. Peter had to explain his change of heart to the church council in Jerusalem. They still had to figure out what was expected of followers of Christ. And they did, and you can read about it in Acts 11. And throughout the history of the church, we have grown and evolved and changed in our understanding of who's "in" and who's "out." But at the heart of it all is this scriptural declaration "God plays no favorites."

If you've ever been a favorite, you may have liked it but it was also a pain. People being envious, jealous, giving you a hard time for being the fair-haired boy or Daddy's little girl. And you may have felt just a bit owned, and just a bit alienated from those who weren't favored.

And if you haven't been favored, you know what that's like, too: last chosen for the pick-up sports game; left standing at the dance; watching in sadness as siblings and co-workers get the privileged treatment.

It makes sense to me that God, who created us all and whose love for us all is witnessed in Christian scripture, wants something better: a community where all are welcomed.

And, honestly, at the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, we do pretty well here. We have people of different educational backgrounds, different abilities, different homes of origin, different professions. We have room for growth in welcoming people of color, based on Milford's demographics of 5% of population being people of color. And we are a Reconciling Congregation with a decade of history welcoming people regardless of sexual orientation or identity.

It is on this last point that I hope we will come to a deeper sense of Peter's vision. I hope we will grow in our welcome to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender people. There are so many places that people, speaking in the name of Christ, are hurtful. I hope we will be healing. I hope we will remember what it has been like for us, in our lives, to be excluded; and not do that to others whom God surely welcomes.

I believe Mary Taylor Memorial Church has an opportunity to lead—our community, Conference and denomination—toward the future that God sees.

Regardless of what I believe, I know that leaders—within and outside Mary Taylor Church—will continue to take risks because the love of God has so touched and transformed them that they can do nothing else. The love of God: freely, extravagantly given to all. God plays no favorites. Let's do the same. Amen.