

“Playing Favorites”

Psalm 125; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Connecticut

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It’s Rally Day! Public school started seven school days ago in Milford, and today Sunday School has begun here. Did you know that the origin of free public education in the United States came from Protestant church Sunday School? It did! (1) Sunday schools were actually schools that met on Sunday because the Industrial Revolution used child labor six days a week and Sunday was the only day that working people could hope to gain education for themselves and their children.

The Protestant origin of public school is also part of the reason that Roman Catholic immigrants in the 19th century started separate schools: the mainstream public schools still taught Protestant Christianity in addition to “reading, ‘writing and ‘rithmatic.”

It’s Rally Day! For me, the day is poignant. It’s the day my mom died three years ago. In fact, Carol and I were at her side early that morning, four hours away from here in Maryland. Mom was unable to speak and agitated but Dad, knowing it was my first Rally Day with you, said “*Go, I’ll settle her down after you leave.*” We left, and by 6 a.m. I got that call on the Merritt Parkway that she died two hours before, long before I returned to Connecticut. While I initially had regrets about that, Mom was a churchwoman. She loved her Lord and she loved her church and I firmly believe she wanted me here with you and to be successful for God in this place. There is not a day I don’t think about her and I am grateful that you honor her with me as we succeed in ministry together.

(1) www.christianitytoday.com/ch/asktheexpert/whendidsundayschoolstart.html

It's Rally Day! The beginning of public school and Sunday School brings meeting and greeting of students and teachers that is the foundation of collaborative learning. With it comes, perhaps later, perhaps sooner, that cry that has probably come from every generation of students: *Teacher's pet!*

"Teacher's pet, teacher's pet!" It is, depending on one's point of view, the anthem of favoritism; the battle cry of under achievers; or a stonewall to open learning. Whether deserved or not, those tarred with the brush are presumed to have an "in" with the teacher, receiving special treatment and perhaps even better grades. Teachers perceived as bestowing such favoritism, deserved or not, receive the silent scorn of those not favored; or labor and entreaty from those students who hope to gain it. The risk, always, is to be seen by one's peers as "sucking up" to the teacher, a combination of traitor and entrepreneur.

Imagine this from my perspective, teaching Confirmation for the last 35 years. Not only are students worried about being seen as "sucking up," they are worried about it with the fear of divine retribution thrown in! It is a daunting task to get kids on my page: that we are journeying together.

"Playing favorites." Whether teacher or student, we're all tempted to do it. The writer from James warns us that it's contrary to God's will, and especially so in relation to rich and poor. "Teacher's pet" is a child's game compared to how we too often are deferential to wealth and distaining poverty. James' remarks, while they may have application to the general culture, are specifically aimed at Christian community. How much, and how often, do we size each other up because of what we wear, what we drive, where we live, where we work and whether our office is in the one on the corner? My guess is that none of us gets out from under James' commentary without an indictment, including this preacher.

It's a fine line, of course. As we improve our church's physical plant and see an uptick in visitors, a number of you have heard me say that we need to bring our "A" game every week. Every week. Because people are looking for the meaning that Christian faith and service provides, and they are searching for the spiritual quality of a progressive church. Our average attendance in the ten weeks of summer this year is 136: the highest in my four summers here. We need to offer searchers and ourselves, as well as God, our "A" game.

But not at the expense of our souls. Some of you who are theologically read know that the Protestant reformer Martin Luther called James "an epistle of straw." In other words, it had little to offer, presumably (most scholars agree) because it contradicts Luther's assertion that we are saved only by faith. But James is not written to be a systematic theology but an example of applied Christianity. As such, it makes perfect sense: what good does it do to say we have faith but not put it into action? Today's program is filled with ways to act. Next Sunday during the Mission Minute, Leigh Bak is going to outline how United Methodists in Milford are still responding to devastation from Superstorm Sandy—yes, three years later there are houses that are in disrepair—and what we can do to help. I think it might have been as simple for Martin Luther, as it is for some of us, that the letter of James got a little too close to the heart of the matter.

And lest we react at one extreme or the other—take the preacher to task for getting high and mighty or take ourselves to task for our failure to act—our Lord Jesus Christ himself wrestled with playing favorites. Today's Gospel finds him in conversation with a Syrophenician woman—a Greek, a Gentile, a non-Jew, an outsider—who has the audacity to ask him for healing for her daughter. For those whose understanding of Jesus' divinity is oppositional to his

humanity, this story poses many problems. For those who see Jesus' divinity through his humanity, this story promises hope when we are inclined to play favorites. Jesus, out of the cultural bias of his day, was playing favorite to the Jews and against this Gentile woman. While some might argue his reaction is to her gender, Mark's story does not support this. In Mark 5:25 and following, Jesus encounters a woman with a hemorrhage and heals her, calling her "Daughter," a term of affection. His reaction to the Syro-phoenician woman, then, must be based on prejudice toward her not being Jewish. His reaction to her was clearly condescending and disrespectful. No amount of theological choreography is going to let us dance away from that. Her persistence and insight—even dogs get to eat the crumbs of the children of the owners—told him that a crumb would be enough to her. Her insight confronts Jesus' own prejudice.

This confrontation disorients Jesus geographically and theologically. Mark tells us he went "*by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.*" One of three things is happening here: Mark doesn't know what he's talking about, Jesus has no sense of direction and won't ask, or some kind of change is happening in him. To go to the Sea of Galilee from Tyre to Sidon in the region of the Decapolis is like saying that you are going, literally, from Milford to Old Saybrook by traveling first to Westport by way of Trumbull. It makes absolutely no sense. Unless Jesus is trying to figure it out where God is calling him.

That is what I believe it is. Jesus has been confronted in his prejudice and now goes away from Jewish territory and into the Decapolis. The Decapolis was Semitic territory—Jewish and Aramean—that was a center of Greek and Roman culture. It's like he's trying to get his bearings, returning to Jewish people in territory controlled by Gentiles. It's significant

that this is one of the places that Mark records Jesus speaking in Aramaic, which is a Greek-based language. It's as if it is dawning on Mark, and perhaps Jesus, that God's message of redemption is not limited to a single group or culture.

So where does this leave us, besides the obvious declaration that God welcomes all? If the one whom we call Savior and Lord had to examine his own assumptions, so do we. Folks we regard as "different," whatever that difference—racially, culturally, by gender identity or sexual orientation, by education or socio-economic status, abled or differently-abled—may be more blessed by God than we could ever hope to be. We are to welcome all, not play favorites, and live in deeds the creed we profess. And if we recognize ourselves among those whom polite society has not favored, we have a reminder that God's perception of us goes far beyond how others may have labeled us. Indeed, God looks within the very depths of our soul to see a child of God: worthy, loved, redeemed. If we have to play favorites at all, let's do it as God does: seeing all as worthy, loved, redeemed.