

Showing No Partiality

Sermon 46 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 12, 2020

Isaiah 42: 1-9 & Acts 10: 34 - 43

It's hard to believe that it's been a year since my first Sunday with you as your Pastor. The last twelve months have been full of excitement and renewed energy as well as times of change and grief and loss. There have been challenges and disappointments. And there have been moments of unbridled joy and laughter.

Reflecting on the texts for today's worship I was reminded of some of the earliest conversations I had with you at meet and greets, dinners in the home of friends, and after worship on those first Sunday mornings. The one that I hold most dear happened at a table of our youth. I'm not quite sure how it came to be that an entire table in the Fellowship Hall was filled up with middle school aged boys, but that's what it was. I took my seat at their table, eager to know what kinds of questions they might have for me. I expected something like: "Do you think short sermons or long sermons are better?" "Do you like to tell jokes from the pulpit?" or "Do you think we should or shouldn't have donuts at youth group on Sunday Mornings?" I also thought I might need to jumpstart the conversation – sometimes middle school boys aren't too keen on talking to almost-middle-aged pastoral candidates. So, I thought about asking, "What's the grossest thing you've ever had to eat?" or "Tell me about the best youth trip you've ever been on." Much to my surprise, I didn't need to use those questions because as soon as I sat down, it was clear to me that there was one thing everybody wanted to know. Which side was I on?

Now, I don't know if they'd heard their parents talking about it. Or if they were just waiting through all the other conversations and events that weekend to see if I would divulge where my loyalty would lie. But somehow, some way, this group of boys had unanimous consensus that they would find out whether I was a Duke, Carolina, or NC State fan. And there would be nothing else discussed until my allegiance was revealed.

Thankfully, I chose the right side, (at least as far as the table was concerned,) and we were able to move on to other topics... but this was the thing that had to be known before we could move forward in getting to know one another.

Perhaps if I had been a better pastor and a worse Wolfpack fan, I would have quoted Peter from today's reading, Acts 10:34, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality..." but daddy didn't raise me that way, so I answered in a way that would make him proud.

Right about now, all the Carolina fans in the room are thinking: "Well, she may be a Wolfpack fan but we all know that God prefers the Tar Heels, why else would the sky be Carolina Blue?"

Even though these kinds of statements and allegiances are typically forged with a bit of humor and perspective, they reveal something more serious about our human nature. We

like to know where we belong. And we do this by creating groups of us and them. When we surround ourselves with like-minded folks it is easy and comfortable for us to express our opinions, for us to think through complicated situations in our every-day lives, and it is therapeutic for us to hear a friend say those healing words: "I completely understand," "I would have done exactly the same thing," and the ultimate: "You are so right about that."

Our affinity for groups of similarity and like-mindedness sometimes reaches far beyond our search for emotional comfort and begins to shape the worlds in which we live our whole lives. We interact with people every day at work, at school, and in public. Where we can't choose those we interact with, we tend to create sub-groups of folks we are most comfortable with in each of those settings. For example, we may work in an office with 25 or 30 colleagues. But we eat lunch with the same 3 every day. During the course of that lunch conversation we might talk about everything from the daily news to the challenges we face at home. These conversations are so much easier, so much more comfortable when we all share the same perspective. "From an emotional point of view, it makes sense that we prefer to spend time with [...] people who are familiar to us and similar to us" (Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*). And we live in a world that allows us the privilege of creating our own safe-spaces everywhere we go. If for some reason we can't find a group with which to identify in our local, physical lives, then we can find such a group online. The algorithms are actually set up to make that happen. So, whether or not we consciously create them, our lives, our world is comprised of groups of *us* and *them*.

Although we have technology to help create the formulas for our groups, the existence of "us and them" thinking permeates all of human history. Looking through our Bibles we read about Israel and the rest of the ancient world. Israel is "us" and the Babylonians, Assyrians, and Persians (to name a few) are "them." Then we have the groups established within Israel. 12 tribes representing 12 brothers with 12 emerging family stories. Keep reading to learn about divisions between Israelites and Samaritans. Then with the arrival of Jesus and the beginning of the early church movements we see those oh-so-human tendencies toward division begin to creep back in. We can't let *him* come to dinner...don't touch *her*, she is unclean. *He* has been blind for 30 years, I can't imagine whatever sin his parents committed. Move over, *she* was caught in the act of adultery. Fast forward to today's reading and we find ourselves right in the midst of the central division of the New Testament - the conflict over the inclusion of Gentiles into the mission and ministry of the early church.

In Acts chapter 10 we meet Peter who is struggling to wrap his mind around their full inclusion. The traditional distinction between those who were circumcised and those who were not blinded Peter to the fullness of God's vision for how the kingdom would come to be in this world. Until one day when he saw a vision and heard the words, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (Acts 10:15). In that moment, Peter didn't know what to make of this revelation, but the next day when some men sent by Cornelius (a Gentile) appeared, he knew exactly what the vision meant.

God's invitation is always more expansive than our human understanding. For Peter, it took a dream followed by personal interaction with a Gentile, an ethnic and religious outsider, to finally understand what was happening as the Kingdom spread throughout the world. This would not be a kingdom bound and limited by a geographic area. This would not be a kingdom restricted by ethnic similarity or a common race or culture. This would not be a kingdom bound and limited by a geographic area. This would not be a kingdom won and maintained by the violence of war. No, this would be a kingdom unlike those Peter had imagined, one that would transgress every social, economic, and political boundary and grow throughout the world with an open invitation. One that would be ruled not by the kings and means of this world...but one ruled by the Prince of Peace.

After Peter, the early church (eventually) became more tolerant of Gentiles (thank goodness) but in every age and stage of our history we seem to learn the hard way about God's expansive vision. We like to know where the boundaries are, what makes us particular and unique... "in the world but not of the world" (to use the popular phrase from Romans).

Unfortunately, our affinity for knowing and enforcing our boundaries has led to engage in some very brutal expressions of violence. We have never really figured out how to be in and not of the world *while being* in the world and at peace with our neighbors. We like to separate ourselves through the unholy union of church and state, claiming "divine right" to land and power. Do a quick search of "inquisitions" or "crusades" and you will see a never ending history of Christians taking up arms against ethnic and religious outsiders, all working under the false presumption that faith could be forced by oppressive state power and that God's peace could be won with man-made weaponry. And worst of all, that God was on our side.

But all the while we have been waging wars against our "enemies," those who don't look and talk and think like us, Jesus has been healing lepers and inviting women to the dinner table. Jesus has been saying, do not usher the little ones aside but let them come to me. Jesus has been proclaiming: Blessed are the poor, the broken, the excluded – for in God's Kingdom, they will be made whole.

Jesus has been teaching us that God shows no partiality. God's peace and God's forgiveness is available to all and it is our responsibility as children of God to ensure that our peace and our forgiveness look like that of God, which shows no partiality based on our own sense of "us" and "them."

In baptism we profess Jesus Christ is Lord. It is an ancient proclamation of faith that emerged from its particular historical context. In Rome, there was one Lord, and that Lord was Caesar. To proclaim "Jesus Christ is Lord" was to also proclaim, "Caesar is not."

Time has changed the landscape a bit, and we have found many replacements to the word "Caesar." Caesar may not be a leader in whom our identity is placed, Caesar could be any group within which we claim our first and highest allegiance. Maybe it's family, maybe it's a professional association, a sorority or fraternity, a political party, or social identity. No matter who our Caesars used to be, when we step into the waters of Baptism, we proclaim "Jesus Christ is Lord... and none of those other things are." Therefore, every ounce of our being seeks to be like our Lord, the one who ushered in peace even when it meant his own death on a Roman cross.

When we say we want to follow Jesus, when we step into the waters of baptism, when we gather around the communion table (as we will in just a few moments)... We are claiming the way of Jesus, the way of peace, the way of compassion, the way of self-giving, the way of self-emptying, for the sake of others- especially the poor, the marginalized, the widow, the orphan, the outcast and the foreigner.

In baptism, we accept the calling and the mission of Jesus, claiming our first and only identity is "child of the living God, who loves us all and shows no partiality." In communion we are reminded of this calling, and we recommit ourselves as we receive the gifts of the table.

There are so many groups and many people in this world seeking to claim our identity and our allegiance with the promise that "God is on our side." There are politicians and business leaders, there are friends and family, there are sports teams and alma maters who would love our complete and utter allegiance. But we know that just as Peter says in the book of Acts, "God shows no partiality." And as Christians, we have already placed our lives in the grace and mercy of God's expansive love. We have already chosen the one in whom our identity...and our whole lives are placed... in the incarnate God, Jesus the Christ. Our Lord and Savior. Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace.