Message: "God Doesn't Show Favoritism"

I love watching children play. It reminds me of my brothers and sisters growing up. Our family was large and we learned to adjust to each other. I know some of you came from smaller families. You learned a different set of adjustments.

We learned to make choices. From early in life, we begin to identify our favorites: our favorite toy, food, color, book, game or movie.

What's one way a child shows their preference? When they learn to say "no." As we get older, we choose our friends, activities, classes and more. At each stage of life, we learn and grow. Sometimes, what we like or dislike changes. I remember disliking asparagus as a child and now I eat it and enjoy it. We are encouraged to make choices and develop preferences as we grow.

Preferences are just that. They are what we like or have grown to like. Yet all too often these choices are recast as hierarchy. That is, my favorite is also the best. When a value is assigned to our choices, it becomes clear choosing favorites can be a problem.

We've all seen this when we play. Imagine you're with friends when you want to play a game. You decide to split into teams.

We all know what happens next. The favorites are chosen first. Then the people we know and feel like we need to include are picked. Those who are last are often made fun of, or even seen as losers. They didn't do anything wrong. They aren't losers. They just lost in the game of favoritism.

We've seen the devastating effects of favoritism, and what it can do to one's sense of belonging and sense of being. It creates competition for attention or affection, even if the struggle is mostly internal. This struggle is seen in families and classrooms, but it also shows up in professional settings, institutions, neighborhoods and communities.

Jennifer Kaalund, who is a parent, wrote about the endless advice she receives as a parent. She says, "One of the most memorable pieces of advice I have received was from a woman who said all her children think they are her favorite child.

What an amazing feat! To make each child feel so special, they feel like the favorite, is wonderful."[1]

Maybe we can adopt this as a personal goal with the children, and children of God, we encounter. We see it in today's scriptures. We all are confronted, or comforted, by the truth God doesn't have favorites.

The book of Acts is an epic tale of the evolution of Jesus' movement into the church. Luke describes miracle after miracle and takes us on adventure after adventure. In this narrative, Peter declares the good news of Jesus, who leads us into relationship with a loving, accepting and forgiving God. The message is simple: it's about God's presence with us. But how it's lived is more complex, and more than we imagine.

This time we start in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Palestine. It's a town with a large Roman population. We visit the home of Cornelius, a military officer. Luke tells us Cornelius and his whole family were pious, foreign God-worshippers. They gave generously to the needy in their community and continually prayed to God (Acts 10:2).

Then, one afternoon, an angel came and disrupted prayer, "*Cornelius*!" Startled, he said, "*What is it, Lord*?" "*Your prayers and compassion are a memorial offering to God. Send messengers to summon Simon, the one known as Peter*" (vv3-5). And then the angel gave him Peter's address. Cornelius called two household staff members, told them what happened and sent them to Peter.

Peter is at Simon's place and he's hungry. While waiting for a meal to be prepared, God sends him a vision: "*Peter saw heaven opened and something like a large linen sheet being lowered to the earth by its four corners. Inside the sheet were all kinds of four-legged animals, reptiles and wild birds. A voice told him, 'Get up, Peter! Take and eat*!'"

Peter was shocked, "*Absolutely not, Lord! I've never eaten anything defiled or unclean*." According to Jewish law, those animals were unclean. The voice spoke a second time, "*Never consider common or unclean what God has made clean*" (vv11-16).

Peter was confused. And rightly so.

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[1] https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/resurrection-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-acts-1034-43-24

Why did God send him a vision? And what does it mean? It's a message about what we see as holiness and unholiness in the world. Peter is staying at the house of Simon, who is a tanner. He's probably disturbed as tanning is a condemned profession according to Jewish beliefs, so Peter is being defiled when he stays with his friend.

There's a bigger picture, too. Peter and Paul have been butting heads for years. They disagree on acceptance and inclusivity.

Peter prefers the religious practices he grew up with. Even though he doesn't believe in the leaders anymore, the daily life and traditional practices are comfortable to him.

Paul had a similar upbringing but was changed by a spiritual encounter with Christ. God sent him to share the message of Jesus and his love and grace with the world. This includes the outcasts, marginalized and those who have different ways of living.

God is reconciling the two views, showing us a new path. Holiness transforms unholiness. Grace transforms ungrace. Cleanliness restores the unclean. Cornelius and his household are the fulcrum God's Spirit uses to change the emerging church and the world. Their faith is true. And the presence of God's Spirit shows God's acceptance, inclusiveness and impartiality. The blindness is ours.

Peter arrived at Cornelius' home. And he brought his preferences, and prejudices, with him. The first thing Peter said was, "*You know it's unlawful for a Jewish person to associate with or to visit a Gentile but God has shown me I shouldn't call anyone profane or unclean*" (10:28). Allophylo, the word often translated as "Gentile" means "stranger," "foreigner" or someone from another ethnicity or way of life, an immigrant.[2]

Peter didn't want to associate with the foreigner, with someone who was different. But he can't deny the evidence of God's presence and grace right in front of him. And Peter's learned about the blindness of leaders through his own experiences. What he does shows courage.

Standing in front of Cornelius and his family and friends, Peter says, "*I truly understand God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who reveres God and does what is right is acceptable to God*" (v10).

Peter needed to be reminded God doesn't play favorites. We do too. Let's learn the lesson. Peter declared God to be impartial, knowing it won't be easy, but it would change things. Although Peter had his preferences and prejudices, God does not.

When Peter confesses, *"I truly understand God shows no partiality,"* he's pulling back the curtain on a profound truth: human beings love to build walls, but God loves to tear them down.

Think about how our world operates.
We're obsessed with exclusivity.

Walk down the street outside a high-end club, an upscale hotel or a red-carpet event and what do you see? You see a heavy velvet rope held up by shiny brass stanchions. On one side of the rope is the crowd, waiting in the cold, hoping they are good enough, dressed well enough or have enough status or wealth to get in.

On the other side of the velvet rope are the select few, casually walking past the barrier because their names are on a special list. The velvet rope exists for one reason: to enforce partiality. It tells the world who belongs and who is an outsider.

Peter lived with a religious velvet rope for his entire life, just like many of us. His culture and tradition taught him God's covenant had a strict boundary. Jewish people were on the inside. Foreigners or strangers like Cornelius were firmly on the outside. They were spiritually blind to God's true nature.

We, too, can lose sight of God. We may see ourselves as "chosen by God" or "God's anointed" while marginalizing our neighbors, strangers or immigrants. I've heard people say things like "God's favor isn't fair." These statements can seem benign, simply descriptive. But when they're employed to distinguish our group as special to the exclusion of people who aren't like us, we miss the mark.

When our actions reject the foreigner, stranger or someone who lives life differently from us, when we put our nation or our people over any group, or when we support policies that do so, we are acting against God. Remember Peter's words! God accepts anyone who reveres God and does what is right. God has no favorites.

Standing in Cornelius' living room, the Holy Spirit shatters Peter's theology. Peter looks at this household and suddenly realizes God doesn't operate behind a velvet rope. God's grace doesn't check our credentials, our social status, our heritage, our gender, our age, our ability, our language, our orientation or our worthiness at the door. In the kin-dom of God, the rope has been unhooked and put away. God's impartiality means everyone has equal access to life with God, now and forever. Amen.

Notice what this requires of Peter. It's one thing to stand on your side of the barrier and say, "*I believe God loves everyone.*" It's a completely different thing to physically unhook the rope and step across it. For Peter to enter Cornelius' house, he had to cross a huge cultural and religious divide. He had to enter a home he was told was unclean. He had to sit at a table that made him uncomfortable.

Friends, this is the ultimate challenge. God's impartiality compels our border-crossing.

God has taken down the velvet rope. We can't keep putting it back up in our hearts, lives, neighborhoods or churches. We can't play favorites by only welcoming people who look like us, talk like us or have lives like ours. We're called to step past our comfort zones, cross the social and economic tracks of our communities and meet people exactly where they are because the God we serve refuses to live behind a velvet rope.

God's prevenient grace went ahead of Peter. It goes ahead of us too, revealing a God who loves and cares for us. We all are God's children, *ubuntu*. We're invited to join the cloud of witnesses who declare the goodness of the Lord.

Peter testifies about Jesus, like prophets past, present and future. This is what we're called to do, too. Our witness recognizes God's presence for what it is, filled with unconditional love. Through the power of our sharing and our practice of love and care, those who come to believe will know they are welcome, accepted for who and what they are, restored and made whole in Jesus' name.

Don't be afraid. God is with us. Amen.

Let us pray …

Acts 10:34-43 (CEB)

Peter said, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all! You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached. You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen, not by everyone but by us. We are witnesses whom God chose beforehand, who ate and drank with him after God raised him from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”