

## God Shows No Partiality

Can you think of something that your whole life you believed was the right and good thing to do, the right and good way to behave, only to come to realize that it was actually wrong? That's what happened to Peter in our Scripture today. Peter had a dream and in his dream he was hungry. And there appeared to him all sorts of things he could eat, but there was just one problem. All of the food in Peter's dream was considered unclean. It was against Jewish law for Peter to eat them. But in the dream, Peter hears a voice, "Get up Peter, kill and eat," to which Peter responds, "Never. I've never eaten anything profane or unclean and I'm not about to start now." But the voice challenges Peter, "You should not call something profane that God has made clean."

Peter had this exact same dream three times.

But the dream wasn't really about food at all. It was about people. Specifically, it was about the human tendency to label some people as unclean, to label some people as bad, to label some people as evil – not for what they've done but for who they are.

For Peter, the purpose of this dream was to prepare him to meet Cornelius who wanted to learn more about Jesus, and God wanted Peter to tell him. Now Cornelius was one of "those people." He was a Gentile – so that's strike one. And not only was he a Gentile, but he was a Roman military commander – that itself would be strike two and strike 3. Cornelius was a foreigner and he was the commander in the enemy's army. He was somebody that Peter would have believed to be bad, and Peter says as much when he enters Cornelius' house. Peter says, "You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider." But then Peter goes on to tell the lesson that he learned in his dream, "but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." After Cornelius explains why he summoned Peter, that lesson was further solidified in Peter's mind as he said, "I now know that God shows no partiality."

"God shows no partiality."

You know how churches and organizations today develop slogans – you know things to put on a bumper sticker or a t-shirt. For us, our t-shirts say..."Belong, Grow, Engage." – our three priorities. Well, if the early church had t-shirts, they would say, "God Shows No Partiality."

It shows up not only here in the book of Acts but over and over again in Paul's letters. It was a foundational belief of the early church – God shows no partiality.

Today, we are finishing our sermon series on the book of Acts and the early church and this one slogan, "God Shows No Partiality," is really the most important lesson the early church had to learn. They had to learn that God was not a tribal deity that favored one group over another. They had to learn that Jesus didn't just come for them. They had to learn that God was for everybody, that Jesus was for everybody. Peter had to learn that God was for a Gentile, even for a Roman military commander like Cornelius. Peter and the other early church leaders had to learn that God shows no partiality.

And that seems to be a lesson that we are still learning 2000 years later. In fact, one way to understand the history of the Christian Church is the journey of continuing to learn and to live into the lesson that God shows no partiality.

We had to learn that with the Protestant Reformation when God showed us that the Holy Spirit worked through the lives of lay people and not just clergy and that the Christian faith should be accessible to all.

We had to learn that lesson when our ancestors tried to use religion to justify racial bigotry and discrimination.

We had to learn that lesson when women were told they couldn't preach or be pastors.

We had to learn that lesson when gay people were told that loving who they loved was sinful.

We had to learn that lesson whenever a new immigrant group arrived on our shores and people wanted to send them back where they came from.

We had to learn that lesson when we thought the purpose of religion is to argue about who is right and who is wrong, who is in and who is out.

We are having to learn that today as young people today are teaching us that gender is more fluid than we knew.

We've had to learn a lot. We are still learning a lot. And sometimes it's hard to keep up. Sometimes we will unintentionally get it wrong. Sometimes we just won't understand. But here's the thing, we don't have to understand everything to understand this one core truth the early church had to learn and to live into:

God shows no partiality.

No my guess is that most if not all of us here, believe this. We are part of an open and affirming congregation. We are part of one of the most progressive Protestant denominations out there. Of course, we know that God shows no partiality, that God loves us all the same. But I want to offer a word of caution for us – we never get to a place where we can say we've got this whole inclusion thing figured out, we can check it off, and move on to the next thing. There is always some new way of seeing the world and people in it that will stretch us.

Mary Page and I talk all the time about what will our grandkids look at us and say, "They were wrong about that." I don't know what it will be but I bet it will be something. And what's so hard about truly living out this value that God shows no partiality is that sometimes we can sincerely believe we are right about something that is actually denying the humanity of a child of God.

That's what Peter was doing. He didn't avoid entering the home of Gentiles or having dinner with them because he was mean. He sincerely believed he was doing the right thing. For his

entire life, he had been taught that was the right thing. You don't eat with Gentiles. You don't go into their homes. The same with the food he ate. You don't eat unclean food.

But just because we believe we are right doesn't always mean we are. Peter wasn't. And so he had to learn the truth of the gospel – God shows no partiality – over and over again. And so do we.

But this morning, I want us to think about another implication of this truth that God shows no partiality. The Greek word translated as partiality is *prosopolepsia* and it is used to mean “person,” “face,” or “mask.” Partiality in the New Testament literally means “regarding the mask” and the most common association in the ancient world with that word was in Greek theatre. Characters in Greek theatre would wear masks, a *prosopolepsia*, that would identify what type of character they were – hero or villain, matriarch or beggar, god or beast. In other words, before the character did anything, you already knew something about the character by the mask the actor wore. And everything about that character is defined by the mask they wear.

When the early church said that God shows no partiality, it literally means that God sees behind the mask.

And while life is not Greek theatre, I would argue that we have our own version of masks that we see that determine what we think of others or the masks we put on to try to make others think a certain way about us. For example,

If I hang all of my diploma's in my office, I'm trying to send a message to whoever might walk in. I don't mean this is wrong or bad, but what I mean is that it's a version of a mask. I want the person who might come in to know that I'm educated, that I'm credentialed, that I know what I'm doing.

And we could pick any other number of examples, right – the car we drive, the clothes we wear, the political signs we put in our yards, the books on our coffee table.

All of these things may say something about us but they are not who we are...and yet, it is so easy to make judgments about who others are or to try to get others to make judgments about who we are by these kinds of masks.

But the great invitation of God is not that we should rid our lives of anything that we might like to use to tell others something about us. Rather, the great invitation of God is none of those things determine God's love for us.

God doesn't love us because of our degree, or our job, or our relationship status, or our level of wealth or prestige or any other category.

To say that God shows no partiality means that if we took every status symbol we might have away, God loves us just the same – no more and no less.

Our calling is to see our own worth not in those masks we might put on but in simply being who we are. And our calling is to see other people's worth not in the masks they might put on but in simply being who they are. And friends, I wonder if sometimes we have a hard time loving and accepting other people for who they are because deep down we doubt that we are worthy of being loved for who we are. I wonder if deep down we worry, if they only knew, if they only knew what's behind all of those things people see, if they only knew what's behind our curated lives we present to the world, surely they wouldn't love me then, surely they wouldn't accept me then.

Early in my ministry career, I was leading a Bible study on the passage in the gospels known as Jesus' great commandment. A teacher in the Jewish law asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment and he responded by saying to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. I asked the question, "The teacher only asked for one commandment but Jesus gave him two. Why?"

It was one of those questions that I was pretending was a question but I really just wanted them to get to the answer I wanted – namely that we can't truly love God if we don't love others and we can't fully love others if we aren't filled with the love of God. But one person said something that has forever changed the way I understand that passage.

She said, "I do pretty well at loving God and even at loving others. It's myself I have trouble loving."

And then it hit me – it's not two commandments, but three. For Jesus to say love your neighbor as yourself, he means for us to love ourselves also – not some idealized version of ourselves that we'd like to present to the world but our true self. Jesus invites us to love ourselves as we are because that's how God loves us. And when we realize that we don't have to wear a mask to be worthy of love, then perhaps we can love and accept others for who they are as well.

When you get down to it, that's why the claim that God shows no partiality is so radical. It means God really does love you, God really does accept you for who you are. You don't have to pretend to be something different. And if that's how God loves us and if church is the place we try to make the way of God manifest in the world, then our calling as a community is to be a place where no one feels like they have to wear a mask. Here you are loved, here you are accepted as you are.

God shows no partiality – the great slogan of the early church. May we trust enough in God's truly unconditional love to show up as we are, to accept others as they are, and to tell the story of a God who shows no partiality and to become a community that shows no partiality. Amen.