

Acts 10

³⁴ Peter said, "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. ³⁵ Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all!³⁷ You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached. ³⁸ 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. ³⁹ We are witnesses of everything he did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen, ⁴¹ 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. ⁴² 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. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Matthew 3

¹³ At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. ¹⁴ John tried to stop him and said, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?"

¹⁵ Jesus answered, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness."

So John agreed to baptize Jesus. ¹⁶ When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. ¹⁷ A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and meditations of my heart be pleasing to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Judgement, a word that strikes fear into our hearts. We seem to talk about judgement almost exclusively as a bad thing. Have you ever noticed how reticent people are to become judges in competitions? Even the experts who seemingly earned the position hesitate to judge others. Or, how often have you begun a sentence muttering "Now, don't judge me, but..." before we begin to explain something embarrassing to a friend. And there's perhaps nothing worse to some cable news commentators than *activist judges*. It's practically impossible for us to conceive of judging in a positive manner, perhaps because we've trained ourselves to believe that condemnation is the

inevitable result of judgement. But this is not God's version of judgement. As we read in Acts, "everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name." God's judgement does not end in our condemnation.

As I've taught different students at NRCC, I've found grading to be a kind of judging that's simultaneously a deep sadness and absolute joys. Now contrary to popular belief, professors don't like failing students. The hardest part of judging students is when they fail, and most especially when they didn't even submit the assignment. Judging is hard work because sometimes people do fail, and worse, people fail who very well could have passed, and even worse than that, people fail who could have excelled. But it's also a wonderful journey. It's an incomparable feeling to work with a student who's not only grasped the basic content of the course, but whose engaged with it in original, innovative ways. There are times when judging can be the

most rewarding of a task, because in that process, you discover the inspirational integrity deep within people. But even this is not God's version of judgment. As we hear in Acts, "God doesn't show partiality." God's not grading us by our action or inaction. God's judgement does not end with a GPA.

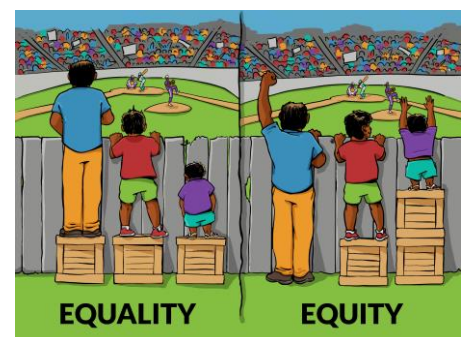
"I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another...He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." These verses from the Book of Acts constitute something of the thesis statement of Peter's life. Peter's constantly in the process of learning about Jesus and what Jesus means for our lives, whether learning that he can't control Jesus's death and life, learning that he's not in fact meant to walk

on water, or in this case, learning that God's vision for salvation was much wider than his own.

Even when we come to know God's love for us, at first we tend to still judge the world from the perspective of cliques, as though we're in competition for God's partiality, as though there's not enough of God's blessings to go around. We treat God's gifts as though they're limited commodities when, in fact, God's got more to give than anyone could ever need. It's almost as if we're trying to win more love than our neighbors, or to prove we're a step above our siblings. If we're honest, part of the reason we like to believe that God shows partiality because it inflates our egos. We sacrifice the dignity of our neighbors at the altars of our self-importance. Make no mistake, that's the mark of sin alive and at work in the world, that we feel a need to be more important than somebody else.

But here, on the day where we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, we remember that the mark that defines us is not the smudge of sin but the bold Cross of Christ that covered our foreheads on our own baptismal birthday. Each of us, along with Peter, still really are learning that God doesn't show partiality to some people over others. It's a new year, and though I'm not one for making New Year's Resolutions, it seems like this year in particular is a good one to resolve to learn this about God: God's love for everyone is not just sufficient, but extravagant.

These feelings of partiality come often because we're convinced that if someone else gets an advantage that we didn't get, then things are unfair or unequal. We've somehow been wronged because we didn't get that accommodation or opportunity that someone else got. If God's love is expressed to someone in a



certain way that we don't receive, we may conclude that God loves them more, or loves us less. This is a great lie, one that has seeped in to the water of Christianity throughout history. We've assumed that the amount of stuff we have roughly equates to our eternal worth, when in fact those external measures have nothing to do with God's love.

This image, I think, helps to highlight the difference. What we're learning is that, if we **can** see over the fence and God gives others a leg up to our level so that they too can see over the fence, that doesn't mean God loves us less. It means that God knows we can already see the game, and so attends to others who have trouble seeing what we're seeing. It means that God not only wants them to be on our level, but wants us to have deeper, more meaningful relationships. Someone else getting something we don't need isn't unfair. It creates fairness. Giving people what that need is God's way of establishing equity on the

earth, of allowing us to see one another in the eye, of giving everyone the experience of love that God intends. It is a lack of partiality, so we have nothing to envy from others.

When God judges us, God judges us all without partiality but each of us with intentionality. God judges everyone one of us in a way that meets the needs that we have, even if other people don't have those needs. That's not a sign of partiality, but a sign of extravagance. Here's the beauty of this. God doesn't need to love someone less to love you more. God doesn't need to take something from someone else to give it to you. The ocean of God's love washes up on the shores of every nation and cleanses the sinfulness of every people. If we don't need it, and someone else who does gets it, whatever it is, that's a sign of justice and nothing less. God judges each and everyone one of us, in our different circumstances and with our different struggles, with the same voice that called out

when Jesus was baptized. God looks to each of you and says, "Yes, you are my child, one that I love. I find happiness in you."

And God looks at the one you consider an enemy, the one you consider a delinquent, the one you consider outside God's grace, and says, "you too are my child, one that I love. I find happiness in you too." We've got to continue to learn that. Not only does God refuse partiality when dealing with people, and not only does God offer forgiveness to everyone through Jesus, but God finds happiness in all who follow the way of Jesus. Those people being blessed isn't a sign of unfairness. It's a sign of God's equity coming to us all.

We need not fear God's judgement, at least not in the typical way we fear judgement. God doesn't look at us and our faults as freakish failures to abandon, but as children made in God's own image meant to grow more and more

like God each day. But any time we want to judge others as less than human? Or as outside of God's love? Or as unworthy of God's forgiveness? Then we should fear God's judgement, not because God's condemning us, but because we're condemning ourselves by refusing God's judgement of grace. Waking up to a world of equity is a rude awakening when you've always expected that you're better than somebody else. Jesus's baptism proves that humility, not pride, is the way to deal with people. God intends equity for us all, so if we judge that equality as something to refuse, then we also refuse God's presence.

One of the oddities today is that, of any of us, Jesus doesn't need baptism. Jesus is sinless, so he doesn't need forgiveness of sin. Jesus is already God's son, so he doesn't need adoption into God's family. Jesus is the King of the new creation, so he doesn't need new birth. And yet, he enters baptism anyway, because he's humble enough to

lower himself into the human realities of our journey, so that we might see God and one another face to face. Lord knows that no number of boxes could stack to put us on the same level with God. That famously failed at Babel. So instead God descends and becomes one of us, looks us in the eye, and baptizes us so that we might look back in love and see that we're each called to be children of God. Jesus gets off his box because Jesus values being on the same level with us, and is willing to lower himself in order to then raise us up.

Goodness. Thank God for that! Amen.