

January 9, 2011

SOLI DEO GLORIA

Good Shepherd, Novi

1st Sunday after the Epiphany (Baptism of our Lord)

ACTS 10:34-38 / MATTHEW 3:13-17

GOD SHOWS FAVOR, NOT FAVORITISM.

In the name + of Jesus.

St. Peter had been summoned to the house of an officer in the Roman army. He was a centurion from the Italian Regiment who had been stationed in Caesarea, a city in the northern part of Judea on the shore of the Mediterranean. Cornelius was a God-fearing man – a devout servant not of the gods of Rome or Greece, but of the Triune God. The Lord sent Peter to him so that he and his family might be baptized and marked as heirs of salvation.

Peter was reluctant. *A Gentile? A Roman officer? Lord, this man is unclean! He is unworthy! Why would you send me to him? Do not make me touch what is unclean; for then I become unclean! I want to remain pure. I do not want to pollute myself or my congregation with this man who has invaded the Promised Land and enforces Roman laws on our people.* God appeared to Peter in a vision. God told Peter, **“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” (Acts 10:15)** Then Peter went to Caesarea and found Cornelius.

After meeting Cornelius and his entire household, Peter said, **“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.” (Acts 10:34,35)** Shortly after that, Peter baptized Cornelius and all who were in his household. Why? Because God shows favor, not favoritism.

But notice how God shows his favor. God’s favor came to Cornelius through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of Holy Baptism. God’s favor had to be revealed and given. It does not automatically rest on everyone. God must give it.

God does not show favoritism. There is no difference of any person, group, or nation before God. **There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:22,23)** Even if we consider Peter’s words, **“God ... accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:35)**, then *no one* should have God’s favor upon him. No one rightly fears God. If we did, we would never dare sin against him or question his commandments. But we become bitter against God when we face hardship, as if he owes us better. We become impatient with people who make us wait an extra minute, as if they owe us better. We detest people who fail to meet standards that we would never impose on ourselves, as if we are better. We despise our fellow man whom God has told us to love. We defy our God whom we should rightly fear and obey. None of this is doing what is right.

God only accepts people who do what is right. God accepts people who do only what is right. And God does not show favoritism. **If there is no one righteous, not even one (Romans 3:10)**, then there is no one who has God’s favor rest upon him. So it is true: There is no favoritism, for there is no difference. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. No one receives favor. All are cursed.

If you credit yourself for being better than someone else, repent. You are no better. And if you demonstrate love to one person over another, repent. You are showing favoritism because you think you stand to benefit from the one person while there is nothing to be gained from the other. So, your love is selfish. God did not put us in touch

with people so that we can use them, but so that we can love them. This is exactly what God has done for you.

God shows favor, not favoritism. Jesus demonstrates that with his whole life. He does not show favoritism to you because he figures that he stands to benefit from redeeming you. On the contrary, Jesus came because you needed the benefits from him. And Jesus did not come to save some because they were worth it but exclude others because they are lost causes. Jesus came to bestow favor upon all.

He came to John the Baptist to be baptized. John, at first, did not get it. **“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matthew 3:14)** John recognized that he did not have a true fear of the Lord. John knew that he did not do what is right. John was a sinner – doomed to death and marked for the grave like every one of us. John knew that he needed Jesus’ benefits. Jesus did not need him. But **Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. (Matthew 3:15)**

Jesus was baptized to fulfill all righteousness. In baptism, Jesus unites himself to you. Why? Because he desires to show favor to you. Jesus is not repulsed by you because you are unclean. Instead, he has come to cleanse you. He saw your state: *Look! This man is unclean! He is unworthy! But I have been sent for him. I will take from him all that is unclean; for him I will become unclean.*

Therefore, Jesus soaked up all of your filth and your failures and he carried them on himself. And because he carried your sins and the sins of the whole world, he had to pay the price. God did not show favoritism. He condemned his only begotten Son as one who has not feared the Lord or done what is right. Jesus received the just sentence and submitted himself to the God’s judgment. God banished the one who was unclean as he hung on the cross to die. This was done to fulfill all righteousness.

In putting his Son to death, God showed his favor upon you. For, this is where he has dealt with all of your sin and guilt. And there is no difference. All sinners have the same salvation, the same Savior, and the same atoning sacrifice which pays for their sins. There is no forgiveness outside of Jesus; but with Jesus there is full forgiveness for all sins. This forgiveness Jesus gives you through Holy Baptism.

Consider what happened when Jesus was baptized. **As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened... And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:16,17)** And this is exactly what happened when you were baptized. God’s favor was poured out upon you. He marked you as his beloved child. Your sins were taken away. You have been made pure and clean in God’s sight. You have been released from the power of the devil. Remember, Jesus united himself to you in baptism. He not only took away all of your sin, but he also bestowed upon you all of his righteousness. Therefore, as soon as you were baptized, heaven was opened to you. Jesus has done all these things not so that he can benefit from you, but so that he can be a benefit for you. God shows you favor, not favoritism.

And this is how Peter treated the Gentile, the officer from the occupying Roman army. When Peter came to Cornelius, he did not come breathing fire, but pouring water. He did not come with scathing threats, but with soothing forgiveness. Neither Cornelius, nor Peter, nor you have received these blessings because you are better or worthy or even good. You have received these blessings because God is merciful. For, God’s favor is

not something that is earned; God's favor is something that is revealed and delivered and administered. It is revealed through Jesus Christ who lived for us in righteousness and who died for us as one who was cursed. It is delivered to us as the word is preached. It is administered in the sacraments.

Cornelius' hope, Peter's hope, and your hope are all the same. It is not that you are better than anyone else. It is that God's favor rests upon you. It is not that you have done more good, it is that Jesus has done good for you. Your hope and your joy are in this: You are baptized into Christ. Through your baptism, you have God's favor upon you; and that is what saves.

In the name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.