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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Pentecost 2

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, one of the peculiar themes that crops up in the Bible again and again is that of “playing favorites.”

Have we noticed that before?

Maybe we have noticed it, but didn't give much thought to it.

But strangely enough, the Bible seems to dwell on this theme of “playing favorites.”

For example, we may remember the story of Joseph and the Coat-of-Many-Colors.

In that story, Joseph is sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt—why?

Because Joseph's brothers hated Joseph because he was their father's favorite.

Jacob played favorites among his sons, loving Joseph more than his other sons.

And, Jacob as well had played favorites among his wives Rachel and Leah. We are told that he loved Rachel more than Leah.

And then there is the story about the preceding generation; there is the story of Jacob's parents, Isaac and Rebekah who also played favorites.

Isaac favored their son Esau; Rebekah favored their son Jacob.

And this biblical theme of playing favorites even extends all the way back to the Cain and Abel.

We remember that Cain rose up and killed his brother Abel—why?

Because God played favorites. God favored the offering of Abel over the offering of Cain.

Lovely, right? Even God plays favorites.

So what does the Bible want to say about favoritism?

My guess is that the Bible is highlighting the fact that we as people play favorites.

We have our biases, our prejudices, for one sports team over the others.

We have our biases, our prejudices, for one brand of cereal over the others.

We have our biases, our prejudices, for a particular car company over the others. We might only buy cars from Ford, or Subaru, or Toyota.

We also have our biases, our prejudices, for a particular political party, for a particular religion, or even for a particular ethnicity or culture.

Yes, we play favorites all the time.

And this is perhaps why this theme crops up in the Bible over and over again, because the writers of the Bible are responding to what they see in the world around them—that people do play favorites, and so the writers of the Bible are committing this theme to paper.

Or, is it that favoritism, as we know it in the world, exists because this is what the Bible writers wrote into the Bible, a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Which came first, right? The Chicken or the egg?

Which came first?

Did favoritism exist in the world, and the Biblical authors are writing from their observations?

Or did favoritism come into the world because it is the creation of the Biblical authors?

Which came first—we might respond to the question with “Yes, it is a “both/and” as opposed to an “either/or”?

PAUSE

And so then, we come to our reading this day from the book of Exodus.

And what we see going on in that reading is more favoritism.

The Israelites have been travelling.

They are journeying from Egypt, and the Israelites come to Mount Sinai.

And Moses goes up the mountain, and God speaks to Moses saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, ‘You shall be my treasured possession out all the peoples of the earth.’”

The Israelites are to be God’s treasured possession.

The Israelites are to be God’s chosen people.

Here again, we see God playing favorites.

And throughout history, the Jewish people, the descendants of the ancient Israelites, have questioned this “blessing” associated with being God’s chosen people.

Because what has being the chosen people of God brought to Israelites?

A lot of pain and suffering.

The Jewish people have suffered persecution and death over the millennia.

They have suffered at the hands of the ancient Assyrians.

They have suffered at the hands of the ancient Babylonians.

They have suffered at the hands of the ancient Persians.

They have suffered at the hands of the ancient Romans.

They have suffered at the hands of Nazis.

Indeed, one wonders why such suffering seems to follow around God's chosen people.

Indeed, some Jews have said, "If this is what it means to be the chosen people of God, that it means to suffer immensely, then by all means, the Jews can do without being God's chosen people."

To be sure, there is even a passage in the Scripture where God judges God's people Israel more harshly than the neighboring peoples because of the fact that the Israelites are God's chosen people, and so are held to a higher standard.

How whacked is that?

Personally, I am still struggling with that aspect of God's relationship with God's chosen people—that they have to suffer more because they are held to a higher standard.

I'll have to get back to you on that.

PAUSE

Now I bring all this up...

I bring all this talk of playing favorites to our attention today, because there is a specific point that needs to be emphasized, but often goes unnoticed.

The people of Israel are chosen by God to be God's treasured possession because the people of Israel have a special vocation, they have a special calling.

The people of Israel are chosen by God to be God's treasured possession so as to be a blessing to all nations of the world.

Yes, the people of Israel are God's chosen possession, but God says that all the peoples of the earth are mine.

All the peoples of the earth belong to God, and all the peoples of the earth are cherished by God.

It is just that the people of Israel are God's chosen servant to bless all the other nations.

To use a biblical analogy, people of Israel are to be the yeast that leavens the whole batch of dough.

But then we come to the New Testament.

And New Testament sees Christianity as receiving this baton of special servanthood from God because of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, during his earthly ministry, Jesus summons his twelve disciples, who symbolically represent the twelve tribes of Israel...

Jesus summons his twelve disciples and he sends them out to exorcise unclean spirits.

The twelve disciples are sent out to cure every disease and every sickness.

The twelve disciples are sent out to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The twelve disciples are sent out to be a blessing to the nations of the world. At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them everything I have commanded you."

So it is such, that now Christianity is the yeast that leavens the whole batch of dough.

Now Christians are understood as the chosen people of God.

But that does not mean, sisters and brothers in Christ, that we are to boast that we are God's favored people and others aren't.

That does not mean, brothers and sisters in Christ, that we are to glory in our so-called favored status.

That does not mean that we can look down our nose at others.

No, we have had too much of that kind of behavior for too long in our society.

Whether some have looked down at others, because they are not of the so-called favored "skin color."

Whether some have looked down at others, because they are not of the so-called "favored gender identity."

Whether some have looked down at others, because they are not of the so-called "favored ethnicity."

Whether some have looked down at others, because they are not of the so-called "favored religion."

Whether some have looked down at others, because they are not of the so-called "favored socioeconomic status."

Whether some have looked down at others, because they are not of the "favored education level."

No, we have had too much of playing favorites in our society.

We have had too much favoritism shown to some and disdain shown toward others.

What have had too much arrogance, too much privilege, too much egotism.

And so we have had too much condescension, too much belittling, too much demeaning of others.

For what we know, and this is all too true, Friends...

What we know is our God is a God who cherishes all people, all people.

God in Jesus Christ did not die on the cross for some and not others.

God in Jesus Christ was not merciful to only a few, to the exclusion of the rest.

No, God in Jesus Christ was not playing favorites on Calvary.

Christ died and rose for all. God cherishes all people.

And so, if it is true that we Christians are somehow favored by God so as to be God's "chosen people," it only means...it only means that we have a huge responsibility to serve like our Lord and Savior served.

We might have a privilege, but with that privilege comes a huge responsibility.

PAUSE

Let me if I can't explain what I saying with an analogy.

I remember back when I was in elementary school, this would have been some time back now, shortly after the invention of fire...

Back in elementary school, one of the great privileges was to be chosen by the teacher to clap the chalkboard erasers at the end of the day.

This is when classrooms still had chalkboards, now they have smartboards.

But back when I was in elementary, it was an honor to be singled out by the teacher to gather up the erasures at the end of the day, and go outside so as to clap the erasures together to get all the chalk out.

Do some of you remember this chore at school?

Only it didn't feel like a chore.

And I remember being chosen and gleefully clapping the erasures outside, and there were these great clouds of dust, such that the dust would cling to one's clothes.

And I remember that being chosen to clap the erasures meant being the last one to leave school, because it could take time to clap all those erasures.

But in elementary school clapping the erasures was a great privilege, it wasn't a chore. It was something my students and I wanted to do.

Christianity is like being chosen to clap erasures.

Christianity is a privilege, which calls us to roll up our sleeves and to get dirty on behalf of our neighbor.

Christianity calls us to get dirty, like clapping erasures.

And Christianity is a privilege that may very well take time, such that we may be last, like staying behind when school lets out to clap erasures.

Christianity is a privilege, and even though it does sometimes require much from us, hopefully it doesn't feel like a chore, like that opportunity in elementary school to clap erasures.

Yes, hopefully, Christianity doesn't feel like a chore...

Because in rolling up our sleeves and taking the time to serve our neighbors in need, we are actually serving our Lord...

And so, Christianity should not feel like a chore.

To stand in solidarity with the oppressed...

... to rise up for justice...

...to love kindness...

...to do mercy...

...to be Christ to the other...

...hopefully, that doesn't feel like a chore.

Hopefully, it does feel like privilege.

You and I sisters and brothers in Christ, we have been chosen, favored by God, to help ALL people understand that they, too, are chosen and favored by God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.