

No Partiality

Acts 10:34-43 & Matthew 3:13-17

January 12, 2020 (Baptism of the Lord)

First Presbyterian, Luling

My sister-in-law came into our family's lives gradually. My brother was living in Belize, in Central America, working with a church there, hosting mission teams, doing Bible studies, learning Spanish. He was there for a total of three years, but there were some extended trips back home. He began talking about Mayra, who was a part of the church where he was working. He would go over to Mayra's house, where she lived with her mom and her sisters and her daughter, to do his laundry. Pretty soon, he would go over and she would do his laundry. At Christmas one year, when he came home for Christmas, Mayra and her daughter Zureyma, who was a teeny tiny, adorable six year old, came also, to meet our family.

By the next Christmas, they were married, having worked through visa processes and a wedding, and were living with my parents. Mayra has changed our family. She taught us to make tortillas, even though we—me especially—were not very quick studies on the subject. We all picked up a little Spanish. Her English was already excellent, and our niece Zureyma learned quickly. We make her mother's salsa every time we have tacos now, though it is impossible to chop tomatoes and onions as finely as Mamita does.

More than those outer things, though, we changed on the inside. And I'll speak for myself here and not for the rest of the family, though I don't think I'm too far off. I started to hear news from Central America with different ears. Because now it's more real. In the same way that earthquakes in Puerto Rico this week have had more impact on me than they would three years ago, when I didn't yet know the MacCormicks. Simply knowing someone and loving someone from another place, makes the rest of the people in that other place more real. It seems like I should be able to be sympathetic toward people in a far away place without having a personal connection, but it really is different when it's my people, my family.

And I became far, far more aware of the ways a person with brown skin and beautiful black hair and dark brown eyes is treated in the places where I've lived all my life. When our second niece was born, she had my brother's fair skin and blond hair and bright blue eyes. Whenever Mayra took her somewhere, people assumed she was the baby's nanny rather than her mother. People assume she

doesn't speak English. Later on, when my niece was checking out a possible new high school, the counselor kept telling her about the teen parenting programs, rather than about their academic programs. All of this wasn't a surprise to them. But it changed me.

And all of this is just one example to say that when you let someone in your life, really allow yourself to love and be loved, it will change you. It's unavoidable.

And it's the same in the church. We usually speak about someone joining the church in terms of how they will benefit from our community, how we can help them, how Jesus can bring them new life. And we rarely think or talk about how the presence of someone new in our midst will change us. If we really let in a new person, if we really embrace them, if we love them, we will change, maybe in some ways that are external, but definitely in some ways that are internal.

This is where Peter is, in the tenth chapter of Acts. His world has been rocked, by God. He's had an encounter with a Gentile, a Roman soldier, and a vision from God, and he's changed his mind on what had been the bedrock of his understanding of what being a follower of Jesus needed to mean. Before this encounter and vision, Peter believed that Christianity—though it wasn't called that yet—that Christianity, and the saving life and death of Jesus, was open to Jews from all over. That was the message of Pentecost, that the Holy Spirit came upon Jews from every nation, and they all could understand each other. Which was true. The message of Jesus was open to Jews from all over. And in some sense, that could be understood as “everybody.”

But what Peter's encounter with Cornelius revealed that Jesus really was for everybody. Everybody. It wasn't limited in any way. Not limited by a person's ethnicity. Not limited by a person's current religious practices. Jesus was for everybody. By the end of Acts, the group of Christians even decides that in order to follow Jesus, you don't have to follow Jewish practices. This is something different.

So when Peter opens his sermon with “I truly understand that God shows no partiality,” which could also be something like “I'm coming to understand” or “I'm in the process of figuring out what it means when I say that God shows no partiality.” Peter had just broadened that to mean not just that God didn't show partiality among Jews, but that God didn't show partiality among anyone. And even if he thinks he understands that, it's one of those things that has implications beyond that initial moment of understanding.

If this group of Jewish, Jesus-followers is going to follow God in not showing partiality, and let just anyone be baptized, let just anyone come into their

fellowship, then they are going to be changed. And that's what Peter will be coming to understand and realize. Making this decision to obey God's impartiality will forever change the character and self-understanding of their community.

They will be changed. And change is hard. And change, even if it's welcome and celebrated, is stressful. This is the right decision for Peter and the early church, but that doesn't mean it's an easy decision, nor that it will have easy consequences.

I am supposing that the compilers of the lectionary put this passage alongside the baptism of Jesus, because Peter references Jesus' baptism by John in his list of preaching points. It's kind of a grocery list of things he wants to cover: John announced the baptism; ministry began in Galilee; God anointed Jesus (which is the word for Christ in Greek and Messiah in Hebrew); he did good and healed the oppressed; the crucifixion and resurrection; the appearances after the resurrection; the commands of Jesus for his followers to preach that he is the judge and the one the prophets foretold who would bring forgiveness of sins.

It's a complex sermon, but it all begins with Jesus's baptism, where the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and God says "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Peter includes all of these things, because they all follow from what happened before and lead inevitably, because they follow God's leading, lead inevitably toward "God shows no partiality." The God who can become flesh and live among us, the God who can be God-with-us in Jesus Christ the Beloved Son, is not going to limit which ones of humans belong to "us" and which ones do not. God shows no partiality. God is with us, all of us. Anyone can come to believe and trust in Jesus and there aren't any entrance requirements other than that. Our own church constitution says that we can't deny membership on any basis other than belief in Jesus Christ. Because God shows no partiality, neither can we.

But showing no partiality isn't easy. It sometimes goes against our instincts, our protective instincts for our own community, our instincts toward keeping things the way they are, our instinct to stay comfortable. When we welcome in people who are different from us, in whatever way, we have to change. And Peter doesn't mean that we can welcome people in just a little bit, just inside the door. We welcome people all the way in, and that means we are then different too.

I am remembering the Sunday a couple months ago, when Lemuel Garcia came to preach here, and brought his family and friends. I believe that we were welcoming of them all, welcoming to him. And in order to be welcoming to him, we had to change a few things. He preached a lot longer than we are used to. He

had an accent that probably made most of us work a little harder to listen. We didn't start on time that Sunday, because not everyone was settled in their pews. We changed that Sunday, because we were different, because we welcomed Lemuel and his family into our community. And I was really proud of us for doing that well. It didn't surprise me, because I already knew you're gifted at that.

But it's relatively easy to change ourselves for one Sunday. It's easy to welcome someone who is different, when you know you're only going to have to change for a little while, even if those changes feel significant, they are temporary.

To welcome in someone who is different on a permanent basis, well, that requires some more work. It's harder to want to change not just what we do, but who we are, forever, because someone new is here.

God shows no partiality. We worship that same God made known to us in Jesus Christ. So we are called to show no partiality either. And that will change us in ways that we enjoy and ways that trouble us, ways that grow our capacity for compassion, ways that we can see and ways we're hardly aware of. Thanks be to God that we welcome as we have been welcomed.