

"Playing Favorites"

James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Some of us of a certain age remember the comedians "The Smothers Brothers" and Tommy's line to his brother Dick: *"Mom always liked you best."* Perhaps some of us live that reality. My brothers insist that I was the favorite son. I deny it.

Yet my mom – Yvonne Clarice Atkinson Bodt – is close to mind and heart this morning, having passed 12 years ago tomorrow by date, but a Sunday morning on the first day of Sunday School. Some of my Mary Taylor Memorial friends, here today, will remember.

Speaking of school: it started this week if not before Labor Day. We include our teachers, paraprofessionals and students in our prayers today, both active and retired. We are especially mindful of the danger they face after yet another school shooting and murders this week in Georgia. Prayer is important. So is seeking freedom from violence. Let us do both.

In happier days school gives rise to learning, playing and growing. Following the theme of today's scriptures and the title of this message *"Playing Favorites,"* it also can lead to the cry *"Teacher's Pet!"* It is, depending on one's point of view, the anthem of favoritism; the battle cry of underachievers; or a stonewall to learning. Whether deserved or not, those tarred with the brush "teacher's pet" are presumed to have an "in" with the teacher, receiving special treatment and perhaps even better grades. Teachers perceived as bestowing such favoritism, deserved or not, receive the silent scorn of those not favored; or labor and entreaty from those students who hope to gain it. The risk, always, is to be seen by one's peers as "sucking up" to the teacher, a combination of traitor and entrepreneur.

"Playing favorites." Whether teacher, student or neither, we're all tempted to do it. The writer from James warns us that it's contrary to God's yearning for us, especially so in relation to rich and poor. "Teacher's pet" is a child's game compared to how we too often are deferential to wealth and disdain poverty. James' remarks, while they may have

application to the general culture, are specifically aimed at the Christian community. How much, and how often, do we size each other up because of what we wear, what we drive, where we live, where we work and whether our office is the one on the corner? My guess is that none of us gets out from under James' commentary without an indictment, including this preacher.

It's a fine line, of course. As we improve our congregation's vitality and growth, we look for excellence in ministry. Not for its own sake, but because people are searching for the spiritual quality of a progressive church. We need to offer God, and one another, our best selves and ministry.

But not at the expense of our souls. As you'll note in today's bulletin, WUMC leaders and others are reading True Inclusion: Creating Communities of Radical Embrace. These reflections by the Rev. Brandon Robertson are our church's "next steps" following our affirmation of decisions of the General Conference of our church to be fully welcoming of folks regardless of sexual orientation. This is not always a popular assertion, as United Methodists know well. One of Rev. Robertson's comments is that this lack of popularity means that our congregations will not always be large. We sometimes have to challenge the notion that "bigger is better," even though more resources are often desired.

The broader risk to our souls that James identifies is an emphasis on "faith" at the expense of works. I noted last week that no less a scholar than the reformer Martin Luther called the book of James "an epistle of straw" because it seems to contradict Luther's assertion that we are saved only by faith.

The thing is, James is not written to be a systematic theology, but as an example of applied Christianity. You don't need a theological degree or any degree to understand his point: what good does it do to say we have faith but not put it into action? Today's program is filled with ways to act on our faith, from the Woodbury Food Bank to the Book Sale to the choirs to the Ecuador mission. Luther's problem may have been as simple as it is for some of us, that James gets a little too close to the heart of the matter.

And lest we react at one extreme or the other—take the preacher to task for getting high and mighty or take ourselves to task for our failure to act—let us remember that we are constantly growing in understanding and implementing our faith. We are not alone. Our Lord Jesus Christ himself wrestled with playing favorites.

A few weeks ago I noted that when Jesus sent out the disciples he sent them to “the lost sheep of Israel.” I said, “*That changed, but that is a sermon for another day.*” Today is that day. Today’s Gospel find Jesus in conversation with a Syrophoenician woman—a Greek, a Gentile, a non-Jew, and outsider, a descendent of the Phoenicians who battled the Jews for control of Israel and among whom was no less than Goliath of Gath. So she was from a group historically hostile—literally and theologically—to Jesus’ Judaism.

For those whose understanding of Jesus’ divinity is superior to his humanity, this story poses problems. For those who see Jesus *through* his humanity, this story promises hope when **we** are inclined to play favorites. Out of the cultural bias of his day, Jesus played favorite to Jews against this Gentile woman. Some argue that his reaction to her is gender-based, but Mark’s gospel does not support this, since two chapters earlier he heals a woman with a hemorrhage and calls her “daughter.” So his reaction to the Syrophoenician woman is not based on her gender, but on the prejudice of her not being Jewish. His reaction to her was clearly condescending and disrespectful. No amount of theological choreography lets us dance away from that. Her persistence and insight—even dogs get to eat the crumbs of the children of the owners—told him that a crumb would be enough for her.

Her insight confronts Jesus and disorients him geographically and theologically. After this encounter Mark tells us that Jesus traveled “*by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.*” This is like saying that you are going from Woodbury to Old Saybrook by traveling first to Sharon, CT by way of Bethlehem, CT. It makes absolutely no sense. Unless Jesus is trying to figure out what just happened and where God is calling him. This is what I believe it is. Jesus goes away from Jewish territory into the Decapolis, Semetic territory—Jewish and Aramaen—that was a center of Greek and Roman culture. As he returns to

Jewish people but in territory controlled by Gentiles, it's like he's trying to get his bearings. When, while there, he heals a deaf man and speaks the word "*Ephphatha!*", it is one of the few places Mark records Jesus speaking in Aramaic, which is a Greek-based language. It's as if it is dawning on Mark, and perhaps Jesus, that God's message of redemption is not limited to a single group or culture.

So where does this leave us, besides the obvious declaration that God welcomes all? If the one whom we call Savior and Lord had to examine his own assumptions, so do we. Folks we regard as "different" – whether by class, socio-economic status, race, culture, gender-identity, sexual orientation, education, or physical or cognitive ability – may be more blessed by God than us. We are to welcome all, not play favorites, and live in deeds our church's affirmation: "*We are a welcoming Christian fellowship who celebrate and share God's love with everyone.*"

If we recognize ourselves among the list I just read, of folks whom society (and sometimes the church) have called "different" and not favored, we have a reminder that God's perception of us goes far beyond how others have labeled us. God looks within the very depths of our soul to see a child of God: worthy, loved, redeemed. That's the only favorite to be played: seeking all as worthy, loved, redeemed. Amen.