

God's partiality

Menno Mennonite Church

May 9, 2021

Purpose: To declare the reality of God's identity as one without partiality, but as the lover of all people and all places

Message: Despite the many claims of God on our side, our one identity, our one allegiance is to the God whose over-arching identity transcends all claims to ownership.

Scriptures: Acts 10:34-43 (Message text, I will read), Matthew 3:13-17, Isaiah 42:1-9

Synopsis: We are in a time where many claims, both implicit and explicit, are being made as to the ownership and identity of who God is, and who represents the will of God's blessing. As citizens of the Kingdom, we are called to a single allegiance to the one who has no allegiance but holds all people with equal love and care. In times where we are called to bless on over another, we must remember that the one who is the source of all showers love, blessings, and grace on all people, everywhere.

Acts 10:34-43 ³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ-- he is Lord of all. ³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God 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."

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⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking,
the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.

I am guessing that one sure sign of old age is resorting to a certain amount of nostalgia when it comes to toys. Watching Luke and Anna play with their toys, I am always impressed with how short a time the object of their attention remains what that object is meant to be. Never mind that the well machined and assembled object usually has more than enough detail and function to suggest quite clearly what they are, rarely do they remain that way. Some even have buttons that when pressed will make all the right sounds and flash the lights to further the play principle and to engage them often in song (more is the pity) about the joys of flying, taking the bus or cooking in the kitchen (though I still wonder what that one sounds like without the verbal battery warning that has been there for 3 years now). My sister in law was kind enough to pass on their electronic piano with real cat synthesizer noises that meows out songs and all the rest and randomly makes a meowing sound when left beneath other toys (I thought they liked us), but even that rarely sees the purpose it was given. Apparently combines are really meant to fly judging by the incredulous looks I get when I suggest something as mundane as harvesting some carpet.

Worse still is that our children are far more pleased with the stuff that they come across in play well apart from anything that we have arranged for them. We have established that sticks do not belong in the house, even if they have names, and we regularly pray for Pierre at dinner, a dried-out piece of sod who is ensconced in our front garden, named after a Winnipeg playground friend. Then there is of course the boxes. Oh the boxes. Here be ships, nurseries, butterfly houses and rocket ships. They don't need markings or modifications—just full access to them and equitable sharing of the immediate treat of bubble wrap, and we are all set. One of the very, very few upsides of our moving escapades and e-commerce addiction is that there is a steady supply of boxes to be adopted into what have you until they have long since lost their shape. The recycling fairy has to make his rounds in the dead of night to avoid the guilt trip and occasional pout for suggesting something so obviously useful needs to find another home.

We have all been there. We all know this. Often times our imagination is far more powerful in our world than life itself. It is fairly good training for adult life it seems. We have our images, our imaginations of how the world is, and seldom if ever are we inclined to change them. We have our boxes for our world and for how we understand our lives, our realities, our expectations. We don't like giving up our boxes, our imaginations of how things should be, even if these images and ideas prove incomplete, unhelpful, or simply out and out incorrect. This impulse can be applied to as something as trivial as how to do the laundry and which detergent

gets the job done, to things of far more substance; matters of personal identity and world view, and yes, our images of God. Our boxes are both what give us the handles and ways of going about life and living and can be that which stands in the way of learning, growing, and changing. Most of the time we cannot imagine a world where our box—whatever it is—is challenged, or worse yet, dismantled. Because that asks us to alter our imagination, perhaps to imagine something that we quite simply have not before to change. And that is always hard.

That is what this story is all about this morning. It is about Peter's imagination being challenged and changed. The question at work in this is whether the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the living Christ could lead where he thought it impossible. Most often we read the gospels with a skip and jump—from Jesus and the disciples, right on to Paul and company baptizing all who would believe. Yet Luke, the author of acts dwells in the between time for much of the book, telling the story of how the church came to be, focusing mainly on the working of the evolving Spirit that lead the Jesus movement from being a fad within Judaism to becoming a Gospel for all who would believe. This is the conflict that existed from the very root of the body of Christ being what it is—not so much can a gentile become a Christian, and what needs to happen to make that happen—but more so can the Spirit of the living God be trusted to expand the bonds of the Kingdom of God beyond what they we anticipated, expected to be. This was THE conflict of the early church, and it lasted well beyond the meeting told in Acts 15, but really until the time of Constantine to nail that down. Peter's dream that starts this whole episode is not so much about gaining divine permission to eat as one was convicted (though that is there too) as it is a preparatory work to open Peter to the possibilities that he has least expected.

For many, Peter included, the Mission of the Messiah was to seek and save Israel, to refurbish the promise of Abraham as it was first conceived and to leave it at that. Now Peter has to work with the discernment of whether God might be calling him to make himself unclean, to walk outside the ways and means of being a good Jew and to answer the call to go and see Cornelius. Peter's speech that we have this morning is the result of all this work and all the revelation that was his as he was given and imagination in the Spirit that was far bigger than what he had previously thought, perhaps far more all encompassing that what he might have preferred. It is from here and out of this experience and others that Peter embarks on a journey back toward Jerusalem and testifying at the unimaginable ways of the Spirit before the elders in

Acts 15. One of the greatest gifts that Peter is given is that he allows his box to be changed and is given the imaginative spark to see and discern that which the Spirit is doing well beyond him.

One of the things we do most easily is imagine the partiality of God. As we do the work of trying to describe the indescribable nature of God, we imagine the metaphors and images that work for us best. As well we should. This is the language and reasons that we must make real what is so often ineffable and beyond us. We need all the metaphors we can get—father, mother, Spirit, son, and all the rest—to begin to encompass the great mystery of the creator. We approach the work of explaining the unexplainable in the only way that we can—through the images and imagination of a people seeking the God who seeks us. Most of the time when we do this, strangely enough, our God ends up looking a lot like us, thinking like us, outraged like us, sad like us, voting the same way that we might vote, uncomfortable with the same things that make us uncomfortable, rejoicing in the ways that we would have God rejoice. How often we like Peter encounter God first through that which we know God to be and in the way that God works and leave aside the possibility that our image of God might not be the only way that God is working, or that the box that we have God in might be too small.

We do well to always maintain a healthy “Yes, but” to all that we say about God, especially when we are speaking God’s will into the world. There is a fundamental health into always holding loosely the images we have and use. God shows no partiality to the Children of God—to all of God’s creation. That must be our most essential notion that always remains at least in the foot notes. Given as we are to the absolute and final, we also must include the modest suggestion that even our most fully fleshed notions fail to rule out the notion of a God who lives and moves and breathes well beyond our selves, up to and including a Spirit who calls and moves where it will. This isn’t to say that we do not discern where we find God, or to evaluate that which is of the Spirit and is not. Of course, we do. But at the core of each of those questions must contain the basic proposition of “what if God might be doing something that we have not yet seen before?” By applying the history of God—the nature of God to seek and to save and to Love, we can effectively know to where the Spirit might be blowing in our lives, in our times, in this place, and even in this world that has seen so much.

The story of Acts is the story of disassembling the expectations that would preserve God as solely on our side. In Christ the partiality—all of it—is gone. By weaving this into our proclamation of the Glory of God, we leave room for the way that the Spirit is moving still. We

are called in the most dire terms to decide once and for all which side we are on. The simple disappointment of not fully finding ourselves in one camp or another can be isolating and challenging at times. Because we so much want to be right and have the one and only knowledge that makes us special. Yet, the lesson that Peter learns and shares in this long walk into the Spirit he is undergoing is that the truest message of the cross is that even that which can defy our very imaginations—the resurrection of the dead—is possible and welcome in the welcome of God's expanding Spirit.

In a time where we are called to declare allegiances of all sorts, we must remember where our one true allegiance lies; in the one who is beyond allegiance, beyond power, beyond every box, beyond every imagination, beyond every partiality. And may we be given the courage to follow the way of the Spirit of the living God who calls to us and leads us forth even in ways that surprise.