

God loves you, but I'm Her Favorite!

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Are you God's favorite? Hey Addie, are you God's Favorite? Rebecca, you? Sean? Loella? Barbara? Now wait a minute, how many of you think you are God's favorite? Why do you think your God's favorite? Is it because of your skin color? Your sexual orientation? Your nationality? Your hair color? Your eye color? Your accent or dialect or your body type? I personally think God's favorite is a gay man with short reddish hair, hazel eyes, stocky with pale skin. Now there, that's God's favorite, isn't it?

This morning we heard Loella read a story of Jesus discriminating / excluding from the miracles he came to perform a woman who was different than he was, he was in the minority at this place and he wanted nothing to do with even responding to her. Now let's think about this for a few minutes.

Looking out over the congregation I wonder how many of you have ever been in a place where you are a minority? I mean for many of us our skin is the same color as most people we meet in town, there isn't many if any among us that wear coverings on our heads for religious reasons, our neighborhoods are safe and friendly, I mean we all know each other and we don't walk down the street and see ducks and chickens hanging off of peoples front porches or awnings and we don't see a lot of people with long beards, wearing yarmulkes, or dressed in long cotton dresses year round, well maybe we see more of those than some of these other things, however most of us are not the minority in any way. We can walk down the street holding our heterosexual partner's hand and no one says anything, our skin is the majority of us have the same color skin and our beliefs are pretty much the same, we are pretty comfortable here. In today's Bible reading from Matthew Jesus has found himself in a place of minority, he is walking in a place where he may not be so comfortable. Jews are in the minority in Tyre and Sydon. Gentiles, who have long been mocked and called names by the Jews, they are now all around Jesus and his Disciples. They are walking through their town now, now who's in the minority? Wonder how comfortable they are?

Let's take a moment and I invite you to walk with me if you will putting ourselves in the place of being in the minority.

Let's say each of you are pastors in a well to do church in a well to do section of a large city and all things are good and comfortable. You are respected in your neighborhood, have a large congregation and all is well in your world. One day

you get a call from a long-time parishioner's daughter asking if you will visit her mother as she has become very ill and the prognosis is not good. Immediately the thought of this visit brings about fear, for while you know this woman well and appreciate all she has done in the church over the years, you know she lives in public housing in a not so nice part of town and her daughter wants you to come and visit her. ☹️ You are being called out of your comfortable, nice space into an area known for violence and drug raids, a place where many evening news reports come from. Now what do you do?

So are you ready? Play along with me for a moment. You're the pastor, and you have been called to visit this parishioner and the daughter says can you come Saturday morning. So, you plan carefully, early in the morning is probably the best time to go to this area, so Saturday morning you get up, put on your clerical collar (no one will bother a minister in a clerical collar surely) and you drive to her apartment complex. You look around and see no one like you, you notice some old broken down cars in the parking lot, a burned out storage building maybe, and groups of youth hanging around, none of which looks like people you are familiar with. You say a prayer for your safety and you get out of the car with your sights set on your destination, the parishioner's front door, which is unfortunately at the building farthest away, square your shoulders and take off. First down the long walkway in front of the first building, you hear loud televisions and people yelling at each other, kids crying and you get to the end of the walk to turn the corner to the building you are going to and you hear a lady cry out, "Pastor?" shocked you pick up your pace, again a little louder "Pastor!?" you ignore the voice and keep on going. You have just about reached the door of your parishioner, just two doors away and all of a sudden you feel a hand grab your arm. You jump and turn to see a woman, head wrapped in a covering wearing a sari, (maybe Muslim?) and you look at her face to find a face of pain and worry. She says pastor, please come and pray with my husband, he's dying and we need someone to come and be with us. You pull away from her and tell her you are on your way to visit one of your own parishioners and you are sorry but you cannot help her. And she begins to plead Pastor please, he's dying, we want someone to come and pray with us, he doesn't have long now, we are alone, please come and pray. Please! She pleads.

What do you do?

When Jesus found himself in this situation in this story what did he do?

Would it take the pleading for you to answer yes, I will come? What kind of faith did the Canonite woman have to get Jesus to heal her daughter? She pleaded for mercy.

But what was Jesus thinking? He ignored her original cries for help! She was not his charge and further more he shocked us all when he called her a “dog!”

One commentary I read this week asked a question, could you imagine being in a high school hallway and one girl or guy calling a girl a female dog? That was what calling a woman a dog was like in this biblical time too. Jesus called her a dog!

Don't get me wrong this is a hard text, the Jesus we know and love is going through a growing pain here I believe. He too is learning a lesson, one that we are called to learn. He's been praying talking things over with his parent and trying to figure out this life he has been born in to and will soon leave and what a task he has in front of him. He's got to save all the Jews.

However, I believe Jesus may have grown a little that day. Learned something new. Do you remember Jesus words to the Disciples when he was leaving them? In John 14:12 he said “I assure you that whoever believes in me will do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than these.” Jesus learned something from that Canonite woman, he wasn't just there for the Jews, he was there for all people.

And yet we think about things like: How do I go about doing the tough things Jesus told us we could do, like he did. He raised people from the dead, such as Lazarus and Jairus' daughter?

I can't do greater things than this can I? Can you? Is that what it takes to be God's favorite? This is a great question...

Jesus was learning in today's text, spending time with God his parent in prayer trying to understand what he was to do, asking questions, seeking answers and the woman in today's lesson jarred him to his core, listen to me I am not going away, I want mercy I want healing for my daughter, I want you to come and pray with my dying husband, you pastor in an uncomfortable place you!

Let's pause for a moment and ask ourselves: What are we called to do? Let's clear our mind of our pre-conceived notions and take a fresh look at the Great Commission from Matthew 28 Jesus says "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20

teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you ; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen? Did you hear it, God calls us to care for ALL nations, ALL people, ALL, not just those like us.

I believe every follower of Jesus longs to do the things He did, but some of us are afraid. Afraid of humiliation. Afraid of embarrassment. Afraid to look stupid. And absolutely afraid we might be in the minority and stand out.

But Jesus said, All things I have commanded you. Not some.

But what things? What are some of the things Jesus said? I go back to the John text:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do.

Where are we in this story? Are we not called to be in communication with God, in prayerful consideration of our actions and duties? Are we not called to stand up for justice when it is hard and we are the minority? God help us to have the faith of this Cannonite woman who fell before Jesus with a faith strong enough to move a mountain, a you are different from me, not nice to me, ignoring me Jesus Mountain. Will we walk down that sidewalk with blinders on seeking only our predetermined destination and trying to avoid all the injustice and those crying out along the way?

I heard a report the other day that there are 16 confirmed organized gangs in our high school. Yes, in Lewisburg high school. And more than one youth shared with me recently that out of 20 friends at least 18, at least 18 were trying drugs or alcohol in school. I am not sure of what the action we have to take, however I can tell you one thing I've began to pray for leadership in this action because we better be ready to take action when our youth cry out and need us, to support our youth trying to stay out of the fray or those that have gotten caught up in it, create a safe place for them to get out of it and say no! It is so easy for us to stay focused on our lives and ignore the world around us, if we don't acknowledge it, it doesn't exist, right? Maybe it's easy for us to say I'm busy I don't have time to help with church youth activities or help teach Sunday school class for example. Maybe it feels like it is as much as we can do to get to church on Sunday mornings. I will grant you it takes work, hard work to do greater things than Jesus did.

I often refer to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his words "Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere." It is not easy to break away from our nice lives, where we may not see or want to see injustice; however I tell you we have to create a place for ALL people. We don't know the half of what people go through.

This week I met a lady who said to me, we don't really go to church, church hasn't been very nice to us. She said my daughters both of them married interracially and the church we attended sort of shunned us for a while and about the time I finally got back in to a comfortable place with the church my husband wanted a divorce, she said I felt like I had the plague, it felt like my married friends at church ignored me and weren't really there for me and then she said I committed the biggest sin of all in my church friends eyes, at the request of a foster agency I took in a 3 year old little girl who had to be taken from her drug addicted parents, she was sweet and beautiful and she needed someone to love and care for her, but she was multiracial and not everyone was willing to take her so they called me and I took her. My friends, many of them were appalled, how could I take this baby in? Wait, this is 2011 isn't it? Isn't every church called to do greater things and make Disciples of ALL people from ALL backgrounds? Do people truly act like that here, in central PA? I have assured her there is a place here for her, you have created a place here at Beaver. Will she come here, has she been hurt too deeply by the church to even try? I don't know, however if she does decide to come here I want us to be ready for her or anyone else seeking a place of welcome no matter if they are in the minority or majority.

Now here is a hard one, I want us to be able to invite her in to our Sunday school classes, our small groups, our choir, wherever she is led to be. Remember it's not just the corporate church's responsibility it's all of our individual responsibility as well. No group is a "click" or exclusionary. No group better say, well I like my little group the way it is and someone else may mess that up. Why don't you leave that up to God? Someone else may bring a gift you never expected either. Jesus was content taking care of the Jews, God had other plans. Allow God to work through others. Be ready and open to God's work, you will find it in the most unusual places. Jesus found faith in a woman whom he shouldn't have even been acknowledged, by a woman who should have despised Jews. But she had faith! Do you have her faith? Are you the favorite so you don't have to worry about it?

Folks, I'm telling you now, people act like that everywhere! You aren't like me, you are a minority so you are less than, I'm not here for you, I've got my own family to care for! We are ALL God's children and therefore ALL family! Oh, wouldn't that be nice if all people were accepted and loved.

**Who's it up to?** Us!

**Where does it start?** Here!

*What does it mean to be a foreigner or an outcast?*

Most of us will never experience that, will we?

Last week I heard Dr. Zan Holmes speak and he used a great line in his sermon: if you don't meet the devil face to face on your faith journey then maybe you are walking in the same direction. Now those are tough words, if you don't run in to a hard spot in your faith which calls you to a strong faith maybe you better take an inward look at your own faith?

Let me ask you some tough questions.

Do you feel comfortable and feel we've grown enough so we don't need to invite new people to church? Our 'club' is full, we've got plenty of people here that look like us. Have you lost your desire to reach out and invite foreigners in? Is your small group study just the right size and people of just the right mind set? Is our choir the right mix of voices and anyone else might throw off the balance? Is your pew comfortable just with the people that sit in it every week and if we invite someone else they may take up space and I may not have enough room to be comfortable?

God calls us boldly and relentlessly to respond to the reality of salvation and the dynamic of deliverance by embracing justice and walking in righteousness. A just and righteous response demands that we look DEEPLY into the inner workings of our minds and hearts to identify and DISMANTLE those internal mechanisms that cause us to demean and dismiss others, the means by which we create outcasts / others / us and them. Make sure all you meet know they are welcome here! Make sure **all** who hear you talking know where you stand on issues of justice for **all**, make sure that you offer a place for ALL God's children. And don't worry whether they are the right fit or not, you live as God directs and teaches us and allow God to work through everything else. The only control you have is over your own faith!

Oh Jesus, what a lesson you learned that day and what a lesson we should already know. You taught us, your parent taught you.

God called us all to be church not just in the comfortable places of our faith. To have the faith of the Canonite woman. You better because I can tell you a weak faith isn't going to carry you much further than just being comfortable. And if God shook Jesus out of his comfortable spot where is God calling us to be?

In the Hebrew Testament lectionary for today Isaiah talks about a vision. Isaiah's vision of God's holy mountain invites us **all** to celebrate with joy the delight that God takes in the great diversity of folks who love the Lord and are united in their common worship and by their commitment to God's justice and righteousness.

This morning, right now I am going to ask you to join me in prayer that God will give you the faith of the Canonite woman, the faith that moved Jesus, the faith to move the mountains of injustice to work for justice everywhere. Are you prepared for that? Because I'm going to share a secret, (quietly) You, nor I, nor anyone anywhere is God's favorite, Yes Jesus loves you, but not one of us are her favorite. Oh, God loves you, however I'm here to share the good news we are ALL, ALL, ALL God's favorite.