

Divine Impartiality

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Acts 10:34-48; 1 John 5:1-4; John 15:12-17

"...I truly understand that God shows no partiality..." -- Acts 10:34

What would you say about a judge who gave every person who walked into her courtroom what they wanted?

"Your Honor, I want a million dollars from my ex-husband because of all the years he stole from me in our miserable marriage."

"Your Honor, I want to sue my doctor because he should've tried harder."

"Your Honor, the pastor ran off with my wife – I'd like him shot, please."

"Your Honor, I'd like to sue Bob Evans because they should've warned me that I'd get coronary artery disease from eating their breakfast sausages."

"Your Honor, I'm a much better parent – I should get sole custody."

What would we think of a judge who simply acquiesced to the demands of any person who appeared before her? We'd think she was derelict and not worthy of her position. We don't expect judges to give people what they want just because they want it. We expect judges to be impartial observers and arbiters, and to decide what's right and fair, regardless of what people want. Sometimes judges give people what they want, but many times they don't, and that's what we expect judges to do.

Why do we expect less, do you think, of God? Why do we expect God to give us what we want? We say we believe that God is the supreme judge of the world, the ultimate dispenser of justice, the one who always plays fair, and yet, when we stroll into the courtroom of life, we quite naively expect God to give us everything we want, and we are flummoxed or embittered when God does not comply.

I'm in the midst of reading Randy Pausch's book *The Last Lecture*, which some of you have read or heard about. Professor Pausch, who died last July from pancreatic cancer, was a charismatic 47-year-old teacher at Carnegie Mellon Institute in Pittsburgh, who left behind a young wife and three small children. The world-wide circulation of Professor Pausch's story of living with a terminal illness forced many of us to confront the question of life's fairness in the face of such devastating losses as the premature death of a talented teacher and devoted husband and father. And much closer to home, we experienced the death of Dr. Mark Cohen, husband of Kellie Wilson-Cohen, teacher of our Kindermusik program, and the father of two small children. Whenever someone at Dr. Cohen's stage of life dies, we are forced to confront the perpetually nagging question about life's unfairness.

Life does seem to be unfair, in so many ways. It's unfair when small children die of painful diseases. It's unfair when people of a certain skin color, generation after generation, are systematically treated as less than human by people whose skin is a different shade of the same color. It's unfair when some people are born into a life of wealth, power, and ease, and others are born into a life of poverty, powerlessness, and struggle. It's unfair when one carload of drunken young people crash and life is lost when dozens, hundreds, thousands of other carloads of young people doing exactly the same thing arrive home safely. Life isn't

fair.

It certainly isn't if by fair we mean that life should do for us or our loved ones what we think it should do or what we want it to do even if we know it shouldn't. Life isn't fair on those terms, and it never will be, and the God whom we believe to be the Lord of life will be a cold and capricious mystery to folks with this notion of fairness.

But perhaps fairness has less to do with what we want God to do for us and more with what God has done for the world, including us.

Our lesson from Acts, Peter's speech to the Gentiles assembled in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius, is about God's loving acts on behalf of the world from the perspective of people who had believed all their lives that God had chosen them and loved them and demanded of them in a particular way, in a way that God had not done with any other people.

The apostle Peter was Jewish, as were Jesus and all of his first followers, including several who were present when Peter spoke to this group of non-Jewish people. Jesus and his followers all believed that God had chosen them to undertake a special mission in the world, namely, to show that God is not a statue or an engraving, that God is not anything that humans can make with their hands, that God is responsible for everything that is, including the humans who would make God in their own image, that God is not indifferent to suffering, that God's concern for the world is universal and includes the parts of creation that are not human, and that the world as it is is not the way the world has to be, that the God of justice and peace, with our help, can make it better.

To tell the world those things, broadly and in detail and in changing historical circumstances, and to live lives based on those convictions, was the mission to which the Jewish people, including Jesus and all his first followers, believed God had called them. The Jews were God's chosen people. The Jews believed that and all the first Christians believed it.

But the first Christians, who were Jewish, also believed that any good idea can go bad, and the idea that God had chosen Abraham and Sarah and their descendants for mission work had, over the centuries, gone very, very bad. The purpose of having been chosen – to enable all the nations on earth to be blessed through the blessing bestowed on Abraham and Sarah – that purpose had gradually become lost as the majority of the Jewish people, as the majority of all religious people eventually do, became entangled in questions not of purpose, but of identity.

What does it mean to be a faithful Jew? That was the question still being asked with great passion and urgency at the time of Jesus, when the Jewish people were suffering under the heavy heel of Roman domination, and it was Jesus' attempt to answer that question, under those historical circumstances and for every historical circumstance, that made up his life's work. Jesus' answer to that question was also what got him into trouble with his religious contemporaries and led to the conflict that resulted in his crucifixion.

Jesus' answer was the answer that all great religious teachers and reformers give to the question of religious identity, and that is that God shows no partiality. God does not arbitrarily choose some and not choose others. God does not love some and not love others. God does not accept some and reject others. The message of divine impartiality is that God chooses those who choose God: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

All of those labels that we use to distinguish us from them – Jewish, Christian, Muslim, believer, infidel, American, orthodox, born-again, saved, conservative, evangelical, gay, traditional, Protestant, UCC, pro-life, Catholic, Bible-believing, progressive, male, inclusive, pro-choice, straight, female – all of those labels that mean so much to us mean so very little to God. The love of God and the call of God is for everyone who will respond to it, regardless of the labels others stick on them or the labels they stick on themselves.

No matter what side of the tracks you were born on, you were born into God's love and call, for there are no tracks in God's realm.

No matter how old you are or how young you are, the love of God and the call of God are for you, because that love and that call are ageless.

No matter who's told you you're unable, unfit, unqualified, or unworthy, the love of God and the call of God will still be speaking *to* you and *for* you after all the voices of condemnation are silent.

The good news of God's impartiality is that there's room on God's bus for you, room at God's table for you, room in God's church for you.

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, we like to say in the UCC, you're welcome here. We say that because we believe it, and we believe it because we've experienced it, and we've experienced it because we've received God's love and call in Jesus Christ. Others may have felt that love and heard that call in other ways; that's not our business, that's God's business. We who call ourselves Christian have come to God through Jesus Christ and that's enough for us. Indeed, it's far more than enough. It's everything.

Let the following words of the blind Scottish minister George Matheson say better what I would leave with you from this sermon. You've heard them before, but their sentiment can never be heard too often. They're the words of his hymn "Gather Us In," and although some of them reflect the nineteenth-century patriarchalism of their author, they nonetheless make up one of the truly great hymns in our tradition. Here's what Matheson prayed for in his blind vision of the Christian faith:

Gather us in, Thou Love that fillest all;
Gather our rival faiths within Thy fold;
Rend each man's temple veil, and bid it fall,
That we may know that Thou hast been of old.

Gather us in—we worship only Thee;
In varied names we stretch a common hand;
In diverse forms a common soul we see;
In many ships we seek one spirit land.

Thine is the mystic life great India craves;
Thine is the Parsee's sin-destroying beam;
Thine is the Buddhist's rest from tossing waves;
Thine is the empire of vast China's dream.

Thine is the Roman's strength without his pride;
Thine is the Greek's glad world without its graves;
Thine is Judea's law with love beside,
The truth that censures and the grace that saves.

Some seek a Father in the heav'ns above;
Some ask a human image to adore;
Some crave a spirit vast as life and love;
Within Thy mansions we have all and more.