

God's Favorite People (James 2:10-10)
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First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/gods-favorite-people

James 2:1-10, The Message

My dear friends, don't let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith. If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit, "Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!" and either ignore the street person or say, "Better sit here in the back row," haven't you segregated God's children and proved that you are judges who can't be trusted?

Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? He chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God. And here you are abusing these same citizens! Isn't it the high and mighty who exploit you, who use the courts to rob you blind? Aren't they the ones who scorn the new name - "Christian" - used in your baptisms? You do well when you complete the Royal Rule of the Scriptures: "Love others as you love yourself." But if you play up to these so-called important people, you go against the Rule and stand convicted by it. You can't pick and choose in these things, specializing in keeping one or two things in God's law and ignoring others.

There's another world out there and we are insulated from it by our own place in the world. We are protected by our jobs, our education, our financial advantage, and we're even protected from the other world by the provincial traditions of our faith. It's a world of privilege and complicity! Our world shields us from the other world and everything keeps us in our place, and at the same time keeps the other world in its place.

Evangelical Christianity picked on one of its own stars in 1985 when a four-person tribunal was appointed to question Tony Campolo on matters of his theology.¹ It was a heresy trial of sorts and it came about as the result of a group of Evangelical Free pastors in Illinois who convinced Campus Crusade for Christ to cancel Campolo's appearance at Youth Congress '85.

Put simply, Campolo had stirred up their ire a few weeks earlier by telling a story. Many of you have heard him speak (he has spoken here on a few occasions). If you've heard him, you know

¹ In particular, his accusers charged Campolo with the heresy of universalism in his claim he could see the image of Christ in the woman and child's faces.

he's a master storyteller. Campolo tells stories that make you laugh so deeply you can't catch your breath. He also tells stories so passionately you might weep in sorrow. The challenge for some is that he's provocative. He doesn't flinch or hold back, and for some, that's upsetting.

Campolo is an American Baptist sociologist who taught at Eastern Baptist College in Philadelphia and as a popular speaker, he would travel the country and speak as much as 500 times a year. He was a powerful teacher and preacher and more passionate about his faith than anyone I know. In his role as a professor of Sociology, Campolo made regular trips to Haiti with college students to expose them to the worst poverty in the Western Hemisphere. It was a poverty immersion experience, not just a safe lecture hall where words are not enough to capture the deeply-felt issues of poverty. We could learn this lesson here in church, where sitting quietly in a pew is not the same as facing poverty where it exists. We take our youth on poverty immersion trips, what do we do for adults?

Unless you arrive in Port au Prince, the capital of Haiti, your plane won't land on a safe, paved airfield like we're accustomed to in most airports in America. Instead, your small prop plane will land on a grass field with a metal shack for a terminal. It's backward and low tech. A few years ago, I traveled to Cap Haitian with a group of high school seniors and saw firsthand this landing field slashed out of the tropical jungle.

At the end of their week in Haiti, Campolo's group had gathered at this same small grass strip ready to pile into their crowded twin-prop airplane. From the dense jungle, a woman with a baby in her arms emerged and approached this group of college students just as they were climbing into the plane. The woman spoke rapidly in crude Creole English, "Please, take my baby ... Please take my baby!" She held out her baby to them as a sign she was deadly serious about her request.

Campolo understood immediately what was happening. He understood because he had come to know the desperate poverty that makes life in Haiti unforgiving for the poor. The mother had other children she could not adequately feed and clothe. She and her family were on the cusp of starvation and they had little hope of changing their plight. No rescue from that kind of life was coming and one more mouth to feed was simply spreading their meager food supplies too thin. She wanted them to take her baby so the child wouldn't die of starvation.

The woman also understood something about Campolo's group that made her come out of the jungle offering her baby to the students from America. She understood they were Christian missionaries and that in America there were ample resources to feed and care for her baby. She was a mother desperate enough to give her baby to a faceless, nameless group of American students who had the means to care for him.

And so, she held out her baby to the group and tried desperately to place the child in their arms. She pleaded with them as they scurried to get on the plane, "Please take my baby ... Please take my baby!" The woman had to be restrained in order for the group to get on the

plane and close the door. But that didn't stop her. She broke free and ran up to the plane's windows and pleaded with them to take her baby. She even ran alongside the plane as it slowly taxied out onto the grass field. Even as they were lifting off the air, the group could read her lips as she pleaded with them. God have mercy.

What made that moment transformative for Campolo was that in the face of the woman and the baby, he recognized he was not looking into the face of a mother and her young child. He was looking into the face of Jesus. He said it mattered not to him whether she was Christian or whether she was a worshiper of the primitive, animistic religions offering sacrifices in jungle rituals. All he could see was the face of someone loved by God and he recalled the haunting words of Jesus, *"when you have done it unto the least of these you have done it unto me"* (Matthew 25:45).

For Campolo, when he looked into the desperate eyes of this mother offering up her child, he was looking into the face of the Christ who images himself in all human creatures. To do an act of kindness to anyone regardless of his or her station in life is to do it unto Christ.

When we read these words from James we realize our problem is that of recognition. We are caught looking at the world through the lens of race or class or economics or education or social standing of one kind or another. The truth of God calls out to us to simply see one another as God sees us. We are children of God created in the image of God and none of us is anything better or worse than the other.

It seems to raise the question, "Who does God like best?" That's the game we played as kids asking our parents who they loved best. You see, the game is still being played among us children and we don't seem to realize that God loves us like a parent who loves all the children equally.

When that truth begins to settle in, we'll have a different way of seeing the world. God's love is shared evenly and equally no matter what country we hail from or what part of the world we call home. God loves us no matter what gender we are. God loves us one and all! My spiritual home in the United Church of Christ says it this way, "No matter who you are, or where you are life's journey, you are welcome here."

If it can't be true in the church, where will it be so? One of the haunting memories I have of my first church as pastor came in the discussions of whether we should merge with a Hispanic church in our city. In truth, as Anglos we were the minority culture in our city so that threw the typical issues of majority vs. minority on its head. We were the minority as Anglo-Americans in San Antonio but we were of the dominant culture and the issues of race and economics were felt deeply by both sides.

In the midst of thinking about creating a multi-cultural congregation that would unite in reaching people of both cultures, one of our elderly deacons voiced the question, “I understand we’re all going to share eternity in heaven, but do we have to start now?”

Folks, heaven will be filled with strangers if we don’t open our eyes to wide net God is casting in the world. It will ultimately be a community of God’s children from all over the globe gathered around the grace and love of God offered to us in Christ. It will be a family so diverse that it will have “one of everything.” It will be a family where no child is thought differently than any of the rest because we know we’re all God’s favorite!

Maybe it would ease the burden of eternity if here and now we would see the world as God sees it and begin to practice equality between us. Maybe we would begin to see the world differently if we had an experience as Campolo had that caused him to shatter all the false ideas of preference we carry around in our heads and in our hearts. Maybe it would do us well to seek to live that way right here in this place while we have time to do so.

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