

## Is God on Our Side . . . Or Are We on God's?

First Scripture Lesson: Deuteronomy 10:12-19  
Second Scripture Lesson: Acts 10 (selected verses)

Focus: "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all."—Acts 10:36

The story of the conversion of the centurion Cornelius with his whole household [in Acts 10] sets in motion the most critical phase of the expansion of God's people. The space Luke devotes to this struggle is itself testimony to its importance. . . . That God intended all along for the Gentiles to share in the blessings of Abraham—which Luke understands as the gift of the Holy Spirit through Jesus—could not be more clear.—Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*

"I truly perceive that God is no respecter of persons."—Acts 10:34, King James Version  
"I truly understand that God shows no partiality."—Acts 10:34, New Revised Standard Version

"Subtle is the Lord."—Albert Einstein  
"To the hard of hearing, you shout."—Flannery O'Connor

### First Scripture Lesson: Deuteronomy 10:12-19

"No respecter of persons." As in, "She is no respecter of persons," or "God is no respecter of persons." It's vaguely familiar, you've probably heard it somewhere before, and you'd probably guess it's from the Bible—but what does it mean?

Well, it *is* from the Bible: several places in the Bible in fact. It's one of those idioms from the Old King James translation that, centuries back, worked its way into our English vernacular.

But despite how it might sound to our modern ears, it does NOT mean that someone, or God for that matter, shows disrespect or contempt for certain persons. Quite the opposite. It means that a person—or God—is not influenced by position or power, prestige or popularity, connections, contacts or money. God sees beyond all those things.

So updated translations, including our New Revised Standard version, render the sentence "God shows no partiality." Which helps: it avoids one misunderstanding, but perhaps only to invite another, namely, that God is above it all, detached, uncaring, indifferent. And that's not true, either. Quite the opposite.

God sees past all those externals (power, prestige, money) right to the human heart. And God cares—cares very much, more than anything, in fact—about what is there. *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

The passage I'm about to read—from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy—is one of those that contains this phrase, “God is no respecter of persons,” or “God shows no partiality.” (I'll mark it when we get there.) And as I read, you'll hear that there are certain things God cares very much about.

This passage is one of several memorable attempts to take the law of Moses—in all its beautiful, breathtaking, encyclopedic, extensive, and detailed comprehensiveness—and distill it down to its essence in just a few sentences. Jesus does this in the New Testament. In fact, you'll hear echoes of his words in this passage. Listen now for God's Word to us, Deuteronomy Chapter 10, verses 12 and following:

So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you?

Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees for your own well-being.

Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today.

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

### Second Scripture Lesson: Acts 10 (selected verses)

Our second Scripture lesson is from the Book of Acts, which tells the story of the formation of the church in the first days following Jesus' resurrection. I'll be reading from Chapter 10, perhaps the most important chapter in the Book, and really one of the most important chapters in church history—it's the inclusion of the Gentiles.

You have to understand: the world of the Bible was divided into Jews and Gentiles. It was right there in our first reading from Deuteronomy: “the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today.”

The children of Abraham, the Israelites, the Jewish people—who lived by God's law given to Moses and to them on Mt Sinai—they are God's chosen people. All others are Gentiles.

And you have to understand: early on, to be a follower of Jesus meant that you were Jewish. Our presupposition—that you are *either* Jewish *or* Christian—that division (with all its tragic consequences) had not yet developed. The question the early church faces (and it seems strange to us) is whether you have to become Jewish, following Moses' law—especially the dietary restrictions—to be a follower of Jesus.

Acts 10 tells the story of Gentiles—the Roman centurion Cornelius and his entire household—being baptized into the body of Jesus, that is, becoming followers of Jesus, becoming part of the church, while still remaining Gentiles.

It's a pivotal moment in church history. And it's also a match made in heaven. The Holy Spirit engineers this conversion through a series of visions and divine commands that cover several days, 70 miles, and eventually overcomes the initial incomprehension and resistance of all parties involved. I can't possibly read it all of it to you this morning.

So I'm going to summarize, quoting a few key verses including one where Peter (he's the one who doing the baptizing) says, "Now I see that God shows no partiality."

Listen now for God's Word to us. Acts 10: The Inclusion of the Gentiles: The Baptism of Cornelius and His Household:

Cornelius is a "God-fearer," that is, a Gentile who respects and reveres, even prays to, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is also a commander in the Roman army, and a good and just man.

One day, in the town of Caesarea, he has a vision in which an angel tells him to send some of his men to the town of Joppa to bring back a man named Peter.

That same day, in the town of Joppa, some 35 miles away, Peter has a vision of a great sheet descending from heaven, with animals of every kind on it, including those forbidden under Moses' law.

A voice says, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter, being an observant Jew, says, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean."

While Peter puzzles over this vision, Cornelius' men arrive, and at the urging of the Holy Spirit, Peter goes with them back to Caesarea.

When he gets there, a crowd has gathered, so Peter speaks to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call *anyone* profane or unclean. [And please note Peter's shift here from saying "anything," that is, "any food or animal" to "anyone" that is "any person." More on this later].

And Peter continues: "Now I see that God shows no partiality. But in *every* nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all."

And so Peter begins to tell them about Jesus.

But right in the middle of his sermon, the Holy Spirit interrupts. Usually in the Book of Acts, when one of the Apostles proclaims the Good News of Jesus, it's only after the sermon is finished that the listeners are baptized, and only *then*, after the baptism, that the Holy Spirit descends, which means that they begin to speak in tongues. But here, and only here, the Holy Spirit descends *before* the baptism, before Peter even finishes his sermon, as if to say to him, "This is my doing, not yours."

All Peter can say is: "How can we not baptize these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he baptizes them in the name of Jesus.

And then Peter, the Jew, stays with Cornelius, the Gentile, "for several days."

## Sermon: Is God on Our Side . . . Or Are We on God's?

“Subtle is the Lord”—so famously said Albert Einstein, so famously in fact that you can find it on any number of inspirational posters. Meaning that God speaks to us—and God is present with us—in hidden, indirect, elusive and allusive, unexpected and surprising ways. Think of the prophet Elijah on the mountaintop:

A great, strong wind split the mountains and broke rocks into pieces; but God was not in the wind. And after the wind a shaking of the earth; but God was not in the shaking. And after the shaking, a fire; but God was not in the fire. But then after the fire—*the sound of the thinnest stillness*—and then a voice, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

The sound of the thinnest stillness. Subtle is the Lord.

“To the hard of hearing, you shout.”—so said the southern American novelist and short-story writer, Flannery O’Connor, frustrated because so many readers were so puzzled by her stories. Her language, settings, characters and images—especially her images—were so strange and fantastic, so exaggerated and over-the-top, so simultaneously dark and funny and even joyous that readers didn’t know what to make of them. (So her writing gets tagged as “Southern Gothic,” which, as she repeatedly pointed out, doesn’t explain much.)

O’Connor herself saw her stories as fictional expressions of the Christian faith. And if her settings, characters, images etc. were strange, fantastic, exaggerated, over-the-top, etc. well, that’s because people didn’t really know the Christian faith, even if they thought they did, maybe especially if they thought they did: they were hard of hearing, figuratively speaking, so she had to shout—artistically speaking.

Again, you can find this in the Bible: again and again we are told that wisdom is in plain view, but that (in the words of Isaiah which Jesus quotes):  
the people listen, but do not understand,  
look, but do not perceive.  
For their hearts have grown dull,  
They have shut their eyes,  
and their ears are hard of hearing.

“To the hard of hearing, you shout.”

So which is it: is the Lord subtle or are we just hard of hearing?

Case in point. This past Monday. First really warm, sunny day of the year. I go to the local Starbucks, and find a table outside. I’m going to get started on this week’s sermon, beginning with this week’s lectionary passages (lectionary passages are like weekly suggested Bible readings for preachers), one of which is Acts 10.

I’ve got my iPad; I’ve even brought along a couple of commentaries on Acts, right next to my iced coffee and scone. I’m like a turtle who, up from from the bottom of the pond after a long winter’s hibernation, is now sunning himself on a rock—I’m going to knock this sermon out in a couple hours. Lifting my face towards the sun, “Come on, Holy Spirit, speak to me.”

Only there's this guy, this guy talking to this woman, two tables over . . . and he won't shut up. He is pronouncing—loudly—on all the political and social issues of our day. And the woman is listening in rapt attention. And even worse—how shall I put this?—he and I are not of the same mind on the political and social issues of our day.

And I'm *trying* to listen for the Holy Spirit. I mean it's a tough question: how can Acts 10 possibly speak to us in our situation, in our day? Gentile and Jew, clean and unclean foods, clean and unclean people—those deep, long-standing religious, cultural, political, and moral differences that divided them and produced among them an almost visceral dislike and distrust, and even at times violence—they belong to the distant and remote past. We just don't see the world in those terms anymore; so how can Acts 10 possibly speak to us in our situation, in our day?

So there I am waiting for the Holy Spirit to give me the Word, and this guy won't shut up. And it's not just that he's wrong on the issues, he's wrong on the facts: he is an everflowing fount of mis- and dis-information. And I have a pretty good idea—no, I know—what Cable New shows he watches.

I tell you: It's people like him—*those* people—who keep me from hearing the Holy Spirit.

So I ask you: was the Lord being subtle here or was I just being dense? Was the Holy Spirit speaking to me in the sound of the thinnest stillness or was the Holy Spirit shouting at me because I'm hard of hearing?

You know, maybe it was both: the guy certainly was shouting, but the Holy Spirit was also whispering, in the sound of the thinnest stillness, "You know, Richard, maybe Acts 10 can help us overcome the deep, long-standing religious, cultural, political, and moral differences that divide us and create an almost visceral dislike and distrust, and even at times violence, among us.

Oh, *now* I see "God shows no partiality."

Again, that doesn't mean that God is above it all, detached, uncaring, and indifferent, too remote and too removed to even see us and our world, much less care about it. Not at all. God does care, God does see—all Scripture attests to that.

But not in the way we do. "For the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

"God sees the heart," and that means that God gives life, love, and goodness to all people, to all creation. The old theologians had it right: God's creating the universe and God's sustaining the universe are just two sides of the same coin, two ways of seeing the same thing: God's ongoing, eternal, perfect love for us and all that exists.

And because God has ongoing, eternal, perfect love for all creation, God was showing me (in the words of Peter) that I should not call anything or *anyone* profane or unclean.

Because, let's admit it, that's what we're prone to do. When we take our divisions—and not God's love—as ultimate, we will inevitably come to see those people on the other side as stupid, ridiculous, and unworthy; we will view them with a visceral distaste, a hatred—and even if we don't come out and say it,

even if we don't have or use those particular words, we will consider them profane and unclean, less than human.

And then, inevitably, the violence begins, first verbal and then physical, as the events of the past days, months and years, including yesterday's events, make all too clear. And this kind of hatred knows no ideological boundaries—it is something that all of us human beings, whichever side of whatever divide we are on, are susceptible to.

What Acts 10 was telling me, or what the Holy Spirit was whispering to me through Acts 10, is that I must learn to see as Peter did: "Oh, *now* I see that in *every* nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him."

And for "nation" here we could substitute "family," "tribe," "race," "people,"; "neighborhood," "city," "state" (red or blue) "group" "political party," "denomination," "faith," "ideology," "affinity group," "team," "faction," "special interest" "advocacy group" or just what kind of car or truck people drive—you name it—any division whatsoever—now I see that, in every one of them, anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him.

You see, the danger comes not so much from the divisions themselves but from our assuming that our divisions—and not God's love—are ultimate. Because then, ironically enough, we come to assume that God is on our side (and not theirs) and sees things just the way we do.

(Or, if we are less theological about it, we assume that "history" is on our side, or "right, or "goodness," or "common sense," or whatever, it doesn't matter: this kind of hubris knows no ideological boundaries—it is something all of us human beings, whichever side of whatever divide we are on, are susceptible to.)

And that's where we go wrong: We assume that God (or history or common sense) is on our side, instead of asking, in fear and trembling, whether we are on God's side, and seeking, with all our hearts and all our souls, to be there.

But how do we seek to be on God's side, how do we fear God and do what is right?

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

I have to tell you that during past week, I toyed with the idea of moving things around, of interrupting the sermon right here with the baptism and our reception of new members just like what happened to Peter in Acts 10.

Because such an interruption would honor the work of the Holy Spirit which is both the beginning and end of all preaching: to baptize and welcome new members in the body of Christ.

But instead, I'm going to interrupt my sermon in a different way: I'm not going to tell you how the scene at Starbucks ended, at least not until next week. Because, you see, so far I've told you only part of the story, the most important part, but also the easier part:

God shows no partiality, God gives life and love and goodness to all people, and if we are to seek to be on God's side, and not simply to assume that God is on our side, we must pray to see and honor that life, love and goodness in all people, no matter what side of whatever divide they may fall on, never thinking of anyone as unworthy, as unclean or profane.

That's hard enough. But it's harder still to speak the truth in love.

Because the truth is that not all words, not all beliefs, not all convictions, and certainly not all actions, are equally pleasing or even acceptable to God. Certainly the events of the past days, months and years, as well as those of yesterday, attest to that. And all of Scripture attests to that. To say otherwise is to show disrespect for God, indeed, to hold God in contempt.

The beliefs we hold and we profess to hold, the positions we take and profess to take, the words we take in and the words we spew out—they shape our hearts, and our hearts shape our actions, individually and collectively, and our actions, in turn, shape our hearts.

God is no respecter of persons. God sees past all the externals to the human heart. And God cares—cares very much, more than anything, in fact—about what is there.

And therefore, when we believe a brother or a sister, a friend or fellow-citizen, or an organization or a body politic is in the wrong we have to speak up, in love. With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, we must speak and act in love, especially when it comes the things that matter most to God: justice, integrity, and kindness; the plight of the least of among us—the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger in our midst.

Now, speaking the truth in love is never easy, but it's especially hard in times of division and distrust. So let's leave that for next week.

For today, let's celebrate with Peter, Cornelius and his entire household, and with our newest members: Andie Ann, Holly and Andrew, James, Fran, Tim and Effie Sue, Scott and Elizabeth.

To you we say: *You know the message God sent to all people, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.*

And for that message, and also for you, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen