

May 9, 2021 – Acts 10:34-48

“*Truly I understand that God shows no partiality.*” Peter says this at the beginning of our first reading for today and it's an interesting statement to make. The word that stuck out to me in particular was the last one: “partiality”. It's not a very common word. Kind of awkward. And I recalled that it was translated differently in another translation of the text.

So I checked and there are, in fact, half a dozen different ways that word is translated. Partiality is one. There's also favoritism. Respector of persons. Play favorites. Consider some better than others. Treat people differently. The list goes on and on.

Now, they're all roughly synonyms. But whenever I see that kind of variation in translations, it always piques my interest. Because it usually means there's something strange going on in the original Greek. And so there is here.

I won't bore you with the technical details, except to say that the original Greek word that's translated as “partiality” was actually a word invented by the Jews of this time period in order to translate the Old Testament into Greek. Because there didn't exist a good Greek word for it. And there isn't a good English word for it either.

Because if we were to take this verse back into Old Testament Hebrew, it would probably say something along the lines of, “Truly I understand that no one receives God's face.” Receives God's face? God doesn't give his face to people.

Except that, he does. I pray that he does each and every week. At the end of every worship service. “*The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord **make His face shine on you** and be gracious to you. The Lord **look upon you with favor** and give you peace.*”

Every week, I pray that God would bless you by receiving his face. Not handing you his face as an object. But turning his face toward you. Looking upon you with favor. It's an incredibly common expression that's used all over the Old Testament. And Peter is using it here as well. “*Truly I understand that God shows no partiality.*” Truly I understand that no one receives God's face.

Except that, we do. The benediction isn't something that I came up with. It's a direct quote of Numbers 6. And it is a blessing that Aaron and the priests were specifically commanded by God to give to the people. So how can Peter make this statement? Clearly there are people who do receive God's face.

Well, yes and no. Because while we may pray that God would turn toward us, no one deserves God's face. No one deserves to have God's face shine upon them and be gracious to them. No one deserves to have God look upon you with favor and the gift of divine peace.

Quite the opposite. If God's face is going to be upon us, we deserve for it to be upon us in wrath. In judgement. In the terrible anger and punishment of a righteous God. God's face was a source of great blessing. But it was also a source of great fear.

Moses could not see God's face without being utterly destroyed. Isaiah stood before God's throne and wept. He was a man of unclean lips in a people of unclean lips and he was sure that looking upon God's face meant that he would die. That is the only face of God that we deserve to receive.

And in that sinfulness, no one receives God's face. God shows no partiality to anyone. There is nothing you can say or do to earn God's favor. No nation you can come from, no family tree that you can claim, that will gain God's blessing. We are all equal under God's law. We are all sinners.

But that's not the only sort of partiality that Peter is talking about. That's not the only sense in which we receive God's face. Because God does choose to bless us with his face. He does give us this benediction of grace and peace. And the context of Peter's words makes clear the kind of partiality that Peter is describing.

Because he's talking to a man named Cornelius. Cornelius is a centurion, an army commander, in what is known as the Italian Cohort. In other words, a group of soldiers who have all come from Italy. From the heart of the Roman Empire.

They are not Jews. They did not come from Jewish families. They were not born in Judea or Galilee. They did not grow up knowing anything about Judaism. And yet, Cornelius is described as a man who devoutly worships the God of Israel. He does not practice Roman polytheism. He does not worship Zeus or Ares or Athena. He worships Yahweh. The God of the Bible.

How this came to happen? I have no idea. But at some point living amongst the Jews, he has been converted to Judaism. He worships their God. He gives gifts to their synagogues. He follows the Mosaic Law.

There's just one problem: he's still not considered a Jew. Because they won't circumcise him. They won't accept him. He believes in the God of Israel, but Israel won't receive him. For the simple fact that he didn't come from Israel. He comes from the wrong nation and the wrong family tree. And as far as they are concerned, he will never be one of them.

And up until a few days prior, Peter would have been among those who rejected him. Up until this point, the entire Book of Acts has been the story about Jews becoming Christians. Because Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. And that's completely true. Peter himself says in this passage, *"To him all the prophets bear witness."* Jesus himself said that he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel.

But Jesus also said that he had sheep of another flock that he would gather into the flock of Israel. And there would be one flock and one shepherd. One good shepherd.

And that's exactly what Peter discovers when he meets Cornelius. A man of incredible faith in God's Word. Who hears from Peter about this man called Jesus whom God sent and anointed with the Holy Spirit. Who did good. Who defeated the devil everywhere he went. Who died on the cross. And who rose from the grave. That he may be the judge of the living and the dead.

Cornelius hears that this Jesus forgives sins simply by believing in him. And for the first time, Cornelius discovers that there is hope for him yet. That coming from the wrong nation and the wrong family tree isn't quite the death sentence he thought it was.

Cornelius hears it and Peter hears it too. And Peter realizes that God's face doesn't turn to people simply because they're circumcised. Simply because of their nation or family. God's face doesn't turn toward us for anything we have done. For we are all sinners who do not deserve to receive God's face.

His face turns toward us because of what Jesus has done. Because of what Jesus has promised to us through Holy Baptism. Because of the faith that Jesus puts into our hearts by his Holy Spirit.

And what's really ironic about all of this is that so often we act like Peter, when we are actually more like Cornelius. I don't know about you, but I'm not Jewish. I didn't come from Israel. I wasn't born into a Jewish community. I don't have Jewish parents. Or likely many Jewish ancestors, if any. I suspect the same is true for most of the people in this room.

Most of us are far more like Cornelius than anyone in this story. People of European Gentile descent, who grew up eating pork and shrimp and all sorts of non-kosher foods. And generally throwing ourselves on God's grace. Trusting that our faith in the God of Israel would save us. Our faith in Jesus Christ and what he did on the cross would forgive our sins. That baptism in his name would mean our salvation.

And yet, it is so easy to act like Peter and the other Jewish converts to Christianity. Acting as gatekeepers for the Gospel. Choosing who is and is not worthy to be one of us.

We don't do it maliciously or hatefully. We're not trying to keep Jesus from some people. We just don't care whether they hear about him. Much like Peter once didn't care if a Gentile like Cornelius heard about Jesus either.

But in Christ, God has turn his face toward everyone. On the cross, God the Father turned his face away from his Son that he might turn it toward us. And his face has shined with grace on rich and poor, black and white, Jew and Gentile, Republican and Democrat, and every other division that our society makes. He has looked with favor on people who don't deserve his favor. He has brought peace to those with troubled hearts.

The blessing of his Son is upon us. His Holy Spirit has been poured out on all people. And he has indeed spoken a benediction, a good word, to us this day. Amen.