

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for September 20, 2009
Lessons: I Samuel 16:1-7 and Mark 9:30-37

AM I WELCOME?

Poor Eliab, the first of Jesse's sons brought before the prophet Samuel: God rejects him, and the word translated "reject" also means to despise or detest. What's so wrong with Eliab that his Creator would detest him? Nothing. Biblical Hebrew uses strong words for choices. The problem comes when those strong words are taken out of context, over-interpreted, and magnified into everlasting judgments. The Bible is not telling us God hates this man Eliab and rejects him utterly as a person but simply that God is not impressed by his outward appearance but looks more deeply into people than we do. God sees that this tall, regal-looking son of Jesse is not the one to be the next king of Israel. The point is that we human beings evaluate each other superficially and so make false judgments.

Over-interpretation of the Bible's statements about God's choices of one over another helped spawn a horrible misunderstanding of God in our Reformed Protestant branch of Christianity. The Calvinists developed a doctrinal system that left many people supposedly unloved by God – actually created to be unloved and never accepted. From this cold-hearted schematizing of salvation developed a fatalistic attitude toward human suffering that could discount compassion for people not favored by fortune or by society, as though the excluded were utterly and eternally detested by God. To cover themselves, Calvinists who held this cruel notion took the position that, since we don't know who these never-to-be-favored people are, we treat everyone as loved by God and potentially saved, but the damage was done. The imaginary people not loved by God did not need to be identified. The very belief that there were such people gave permission to think of human beings as properly divided into the favored and the un-favored.

The damage spread. The notion that some are favored while others are not (and that such inequality is okay with God) infected political, social, and economic life as well as religion. Despite the insistence of our nation's Declaration of Independence that all people are created equal and are equally endowed by their Creator with rights that belong to them as human beings, the thinking that some are divinely favored has supported our society in some of its worst aspects, from slavery to post-emancipation systemic racism, from gender bias to discrimination against people who do not fit neatly into our gender categories, and from cutthroat competition to the use of workers as disposable things.

It seems to be human nature to favor the favored. In an experiment, children decided just from pictures of women they were told were teachers that the pretty woman was the smarter person and better teacher. Tall men and women still predominate in business and politics, with exceptions, of course. We judge by superficial standards, which is the point of God's explanation for rejecting Eliab as the next king: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

We are living through a time of discouragement. Economically we call it a recession, but emotionally the right word is depression. Many who seemed favored by education and opportunity or by a history of hard work and accumulated experience are now finding themselves pushed out, kept out, and stalled out, and almost no one feels safe. If we learn nothing else from this trying time, please let us learn these two lessons: from Samuel, that God is not impressed with the outward appearances or circumstances that so easily impress us; and, from Jesus, that God loves the not-favored people of this world.

God did not create us with the intention of loving only some of us. Jesus clearly did not favor the favored, but united himself with the outcast, the scorned, and the overlooked people of his society. When his disciples, embarrassingly, compete with each other for greatness (like school kids comparing grades or biceps), Jesus sets among them a little child as the living representative of humanity's children, all of whom God loves and wants welcomed into the community being transformed by redemptive love.

How? Jesus welcomed the unwelcome in his time and place: children, women, beggars, sinners, sick people, the physically deformed or disabled, and the shamed. He even tried to bring in the self-righteous who assumed they alone should be favored. How are we to welcome people in his name, his way? What is a welcoming church, and how can we be one?

Some signs of are obvious. Many years ago, I worked with a church that did not bother to print a bulletin for its worship services. Asked why not, one of the congregation's leaders replied, "We all know the service." No one, it seems, even thought of visitors.

We do need to realize that things familiar to us as "church people" are strange to many in our society who approach Christianity with an array of fears, suspicions, and misgivings. Some people come to judge us, to see if we measure up (or I measure up) to their standards for Christian faith or social consciousness or something else, maybe even performance in the pulpit. But many more, if they come at all, enter on the defensive, expecting to be judged or, perhaps, over-welcomed or maybe the opposite – just ignored.

The other day I wrote our Visioning Team an e-mail which included the thought, “Never let those who put you down frame the way you see yourself.” When I reread my own e-mail, it struck me that I needed to ponder that thought. We all, to some extent, frame the way we see ourselves by the judgments others make upon us. True, we need to learn from criticism, including even unfairly negative remarks about us, but we do not need to let human judgments and prejudices frame us in our own eyes, defining who we are or limiting us in our hopes and aspirations – and that includes prejudices framed by religious faith.

A truly and faithfully welcoming church goes beyond greeting everyone with a smile because we want more people in our pews. It’s not about numbers; it’s about God’s love for each person and longing for each to know that love, trust it, and so come to fulness of life. We greet people respectfully, without making judgments, not merely as a strategy for getting new members, but as an expression of our deeply held belief that God loves them and wants to work with them toward truer life, freedom, and wholeness – just as God wants to work within and among us. Not everyone, of course, will find a church home here with us, because there are countless factors and expectations that make for personal comfort or discomfort. Our way of being a church is not everyone’s style, but that’s okay. Seeing some as favored and others as un-favored is not okay.

Notice the way Jesus reverses normal thinking. Exclusive churches seem to think that when they welcome someone it means God is welcoming that person, and so they guard their gates according to their concept of God’s standards. But Jesus tells his disciples that whoever welcomes a child in his name, his way, thereby welcomes him and so welcomes, also, the one who sent him – God. Jesus stands, not with the gatekeepers, but with the person who is potentially unwelcome. That’s crucial: Jesus comes to us with the neighbor we might not greet with respect because we have made some prior judgment and have decided on some basis that we are greater, better, or more favored. So, being a welcoming church begins with the understanding that Jesus unites himself with the unwelcome, not with the religious community that excludes them. God’s love is redemptive. The black spiritual says, “It’s me, it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” *Not my sister, not my brother, not my neighbor, but me, O Lord.*

Each of us has a long way to go, but God will not let go of us. What we are called to represent to people, what makes a church welcoming in Jesus’ way, is God’s redemptive love. Never let people who put you down tell you who you are; don’t let people who flatter you tell you, either. Become the person God’s redemptive love calls you to be. Amen.