

## "Choose One"

Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, January 9, 2011

### **Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 40:1-11** **New Testament Lesson: Acts 10:34-43**

Two weeks ago just minutes before our worship service began Christmas Eve, our liturgist asked me, "In our reading from Luke, they change it from 'peace among all people' to 'peace among those whom (God) favors'? I thought God loved all people."

Well, that was a good question Bill Esry asked that night. Does God love ALL people equally, or does God choose to favor some over others? Of the 22 different Bibles I checked, only one translated the phrase to say that God's peace rests upon ALL people unconditionally. The 21 other translations render it just as your pew Bible does.

I invite you to take a moment now and open to page 57 in the New Testament. There you'll see that verse 14 does indeed say, "... peace among those whom he (God) favors!" – p. 57, Luke 2, vs. 14. Now, does anybody notice something special about that phrase? What's that little "k" after the word "favors"? Does anybody know?

That 's right; it's a footnote. Look at the footnote at the bottom left-hand corner of the page. It says "other ancient authorities read *peace, goodwill among people*" – all people; just what Bill was asking about and just as it says in the King James Version, the one Bible that is different from all the others.

Why does the King James Version differ from more than 20 other translations? One reason is that the King James Bible was translated into English from a Latin version of the Bible, not from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Thus, as beautiful and comforting and poetic as is the King James, we need to be careful to check other translations when making major decisions about our faith. Decisions like does God favor ALL people or is God a little more choosy than that.

Looking at this morning's sermon text from the Book of Acts, we see God to be rather choosy. While Peter does say, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," in the same breath he says that "anyone *who fears him* (God) and *does what is right* is acceptable to (God)."

So, according to Peter, God "shows no partiality," just as the King James Bible indicates, AND God is selective as to who is acceptable – i.e. those who fear God and do what is right. How is it that God loves all people equally but finds only certain people acceptable?

Mark Andrew Olsen, in his fantasy novel "The Watchers," tells of a young woman – just 20 years old – who is gifted with "*the Sight*." Those gifted with *the Sight* can see into the spiritual realm and watch good and evil battling it out, enticing people to take sides, and to do their work in the earthly realm.

Because Abigail chooses good, she becomes the target of evil forces. On the verge of death from a mortal attack, Abby awakes in the hospital to see her father, quote, "gazing down at her through eyes full of tears... Immediately the truth behind his expression burst upon her... *He was already saying good-bye...*

Anybody who knew her father," writes Olsen, "knew about his feelings toward organized religion. Ever since her mother had led Abigail in a sinner's prayer at the age of eight – during one of her calmer periods just before her disappearance – the subject had been a wedge between her and her father. After her mother had vanished, Abigail had clung to her new beliefs, and then her church, as a source of solace. Then, as she matured, it had turned into far more. It had blossomed into a truly voluntary, vibrant core of her character.

At the same time, her father angrily rejected Christianity, managing to remain grudgingly tolerant of his daughter's faith. The most he would offer was a continual complaint that on Sunday mornings, one of his most available times in a hectic professional schedule, it would have been nice to spend *quality time* together. Instead, she had to rush off to *that place...*"

Abby's father had made his choice, and for much of his life he was at best indifferent to the forces of evil and at worst complicit in their malicious influences. But at the end of the novel, the father comes to accept Christ. He turns his back on evil and joins his daughter in healing a rift – not only between themselves – but between God and God's people.

How is it that God loves all people equally but finds only certain people acceptable? Well, in the Book of Acts, Peter reminds us of God's desire to heal the rift between God and God's people. He says that God sent a message "to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ ... That message," says Peter, "spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced" – the baptism that anointed "Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power." Peter reminds us that Jesus "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him."

God chose Jesus to heal the rift between God and God's people. The rift that tore open when we rejected God's will and chose to go our own way, to eat of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. And in response to our tendency to go our own way, God sent Jesus Christ into the world to show us His way. After his anointing, Jesus goes about doing good and healing all people, *not* just those whom God favors. Through Jesus, God chooses all people, and this notion of there being some who are acceptable to God and some who are not gets flipped on its head.

All people are acceptable to God through Jesus, but the "peace of God" that is spoken of in Luke, that peace which comes when we say "Glory to God in the highest," that peace comes only to those people who choose to accept Jesus. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors;" Christ's peace among those who would have it.

Just like Abigail's father, we must first choose Jesus in order to receive God's blessing of everlasting peace. In other words, while God chooses all people, God's eternal peace rests upon those who accept it through Jesus Christ. And just as it was never too late for Abby's father to choose Jesus, we are given, in every moment of our lives, the opportunity to choose Jesus, to receive God's peace, and to share it with others – whether they choose to receive it themselves or not. Even if their faith and understanding of God differs from ours, we share Christ's peace with them.

Many people think there's a lot of grey area in choosing to follow Christ – that there are a lot of different ways to be Christian and most anything you choose is OK as long as your intentions are good. Take for instance, the tragic if not also humorous mishaps of Dennis Lee Curtis, arrested for armed robbery in 1992 in Rapid City, South Dakota. Curtis apparently had scruples about his thievery. In his wallet the police found a sheet of paper on which was written the following code:

1. I will not kill anyone – unless I have to.
2. I will take cash and food stamps – no checks.
3. I will rob only at night.
4. I will not wear a mask.
5. I will not rob mini-marts or 7-Eleven stores.
6. If I get chased by cops on foot, I will get away. If chased by vehicle, I will not put the lives of innocent civilians on the line.
7. I will rob only seven months out of the year.
8. I will enjoy robbing from the rich to give to the poor.

This thief made a lot of choices about how to live his life. But in the end, he chose poorly. He lived his life like it was a game in which he got to make up all the rules.

But life is not a game. In life, you're given two basic choices: to accept God in your life and live by God's rules, or to make up your own rules and learn what it's like to go it alone. We're given lots of options in life, but when push comes to shove, we're asked to choose one. The choice you make effects every part of your life. And the easy choice is not always the best choice. I happen to believe the best choice is choosing to follow Christ, but I'm more than certain it's not the easiest choice. Choosing Christ over all else in the world is hard work. And while we've all been chosen by God, it's up to us whether we choose to accept in our lives what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

In a scene from the movie “Annapolis,” which we’ll watch on screen in our second service today, the men and women at this military training school were chosen to serve in the armed forces. But more important than them being chosen – since most anyone of sound mind and body can serve regardless of race, gender, socio-economic status, and now sexual orientation – more important than having been chosen is what these men and women are called to do in accepting this open invitation to serve. The film clip ends with them running a strenuous obstacle course designed to transform them from ordinary men and women into a military unit of exceptionally fit people willing to lay down their lives for another human being.

That’s what our Christian faith is designed to do. To provide you with the spiritual fitness to face any struggle, meet any need, and withstand any earthly circumstance with the power and hope and promise of your faith.

Over the next four weeks, beginning next Sunday on January 16 and continuing through February 6, we’ll look at scripture passages that speak of such our faith's power to change things for the better. Next Sunday, we’ll look at Jesus’ call to the first disciples, and the personal transformation that took hold of them. In the subsequent weeks, as is printed in your bulletin we’ll look at how the disciples transformed others as they lived out their Christian faith, how this brought about a transformation of ideas – a transformation of our notion of what is truly wise and what is truly foolish in light of the Cross of Jesus Christ, and finally, we’ll look at how this transformation of ideas actually transforms the very foundation of our existence, as we stand upon our conviction that God chose us from the beginning of time, to be children of God. God's choice is protect and provide for us day in and day out if only we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

“God shows no partiality,” says Peter, “but in every nation anyone who fears (God) and does what is right is acceptable to (God).” And thus, all people, in every nation, from every socio-economic class, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation disability or any other earthly distinction: all people are given two choices in life – accept God or reject God. God made the first move.

Now it’s your turn to choose. When given the chore to follow Christ, or to be led around by your own needs and desires, fears and uncertainties, which will you choose?

## PASTORAL PRAYER:

O Timeless God of all places, you reach out to us from beyond eternity and enter into our very lives, that we might know you and, in that, know what is truly meaningful and important in life. You come to us with an intimate knowledge of our needs, leading us beyond our best thinking to that which you would have for us, an abundance of joy, peace, hope, and love.

Instead, when we were gripped by such misguided thinking, you sent us the gift above all gifts, your Son, Jesus Christ, that we might know you as intimately as you know us, and in that, know the joy, peace, hope, and love that you have for us.

Thank you, God, for your patience as we seek to understand ourselves, why we turn from you and fail to embrace your many blessings.

We cling to fear when you offer us hope. Help us to have a faith that overcomes our fears and embraces you as our first, best hope. When we fear economic instability, teach us the economics of brotherly and sisterly love, in which all people have enough to eat, a roof over their heads, and adequate medical care.

Your deepest desire for us is that we might know peace in loving service to you. When we become gripped by the fear of international hostility, teach us the art of universal hospitality, that the foreigner in our global community – even we ourselves – might know the peace that we seek in you, our Lord and Savior. Bring your peace to the world, and guide us in the role you would have us play in achieving it.

And when the instability strikes closer to home, leaving broken relationships, strained communication, seemingly insurmountable differences, and even abusive behavior, send your Spirit of comfort to those so afflicted, that they might know your love and acceptance. Embrace those who, in their own pain, strike out at others, that they might be healed and so start an epidemic of love throughout their lives, and beyond.

For you, O God, are our source of joy, peace, hope, and love, and you know how to fulfill our every need, even our need to draw close to you and rely solely on you. And so we come before you this day, seeking your Word, and praying as you taught us to pray, in Jesus Christ, saying ...

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
    hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
    thy will be done,  
    on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
    and forgive us our debts,  
    as we forgive our debtors;  
    and lead us not into temptation,  
    but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen