

“Playing Favorites”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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James 2:1-17

“With a Beaver bumper banner bound to your bumper, you’re bound to be a winner from the Beaver 101-FM.” Yep, that was me as a teenager, reading a 3 x 5 card on-air to thousands of people. We had a whole stack of them. They were called segue cards, meant to be inserted between songs to identify our station, or to smooth the transition from a commercial break back into the music.

It was a transitional time in the life of radio. LP’s had already gone the way of the dinosaur. CD’s were brand new. Complete automation through computers hadn’t been thought about yet. We used enormous reel-to-reel tape machines, each color-coded to receive a different kind of music. Red meant Top 40 tunes. Yellow signified the golden oldies, like Hank Williams, Sr. or Patsy Kline. Green indicated songs that might become classics, if we played them often enough. Each set of tapes came with a play sequence, and we were bound by contract to play the songs on our reels. You couldn’t skip something you didn’t like it, and the worst part was you couldn’t play favorites, and that was a problem.

Every shift, the phone rang incessantly, and many of those calls were song requests. Those calls were recorded, and if the caller and I were both very lucky, the song they wanted was already coming up on one of the six reels threaded on our machines, which then enabled me to play the call as a lead-in to the song. Of course, that just perpetuated the myth that we had any control over our song sequence, which led to more and more song requests, a vicious cycle.

The whole issue would have evaporated if only we'd had a 3 x 5 segue card that read: "You can say 'em, but we can't play 'em, because the consultants and the record companies run the show at the Beaver 101-FM." However, that would have also caused our Nielsen ratings to evaporate, so we dealt with the problem as best we could.

James, the brother of Jesus, would have definitely approved. As we heard earlier from his letter, James doesn't like people playing favorites. The issue that has him fired up is a lot more important than which song gets played next. Evidently, James was concerned about reports he received, possibly even behavior he witnessed, in which the outwardly rich were welcomed while the outwardly poor were shunned or ignored.

We share in his revulsion. At the very least, we good Southerners recognize how rude that would be. At our very best, we good Christians feel appalled at how morally wrong that is.

James encouraged his first listeners and readers, along with us, to look beyond the outward trappings of wealth and poverty, and to seek the richness that lies within a person. "Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?" In other words, just because someone is materially bankrupt doesn't necessarily mean they aren't spiritual billionaires, and which really matters most?

The danger of showing partiality goes far beyond snubbing someone special. James insists that to the extent we show partiality, to the extent we fail to live by the law of love, our judgment will be on the basis of a Law with which we cannot hope to comply in all its complexity. Instead, we need to "so speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty," the law of impartial neighborly love practiced by Jesus, a law that doesn't play

favorites. It seems that we will be judged by God using standards similar to those we use to judge others.

It can be hard to not play favorites in a world almost entirely built around that concept. A big prize in the realm of geopolitics is having the United States confer most-favored-nation trading status on your country. I receive a lot of mail from credit card companies telling me how “preferred” and “pre-approved” I am. Fame is a by-product of high level favorite-playing, and it never ceases to amaze me how people are willing to suffer shame for the hope of fame, which ironically tends to be incredibly invasive and inconvenient for those who achieve it. (Ever see the opening episodes of “American Idol?”)

We must find a way to be in the world, but not of it. We need to figure out how we can resist the dominate culture and love people without regard for the color of their skin or the model year of their ride or the size and location of their crib or their ideology or theology. We need to sort through all the various forms of conditional love and seize hold of and share the type of perfect love that Jesus embodied, an unconditional love that forgives and endures. What we need is a love tempered by mercy, but it’s going to cost us.

In fact, the word “mercy” shares a common root with the English word “merchandise.” The Latin term, literally translated, comes out “price paid.” There is a price we pay to be merciful, but we get something in return, whether it’s a new or refreshed relationship or simply the satisfaction of having done the right thing.

What makes this particular transaction such an awesome bargain is that the price we pay is at a massive discount, because the down payment on mercy was paid by Jesus on a cross with his blood and his pain and his life.

What we put into mercy is a pittance compared to that, and usually well worth it. True, we may find ourselves cheated from time to time when we extend mercy, but the risk of being choosy, as James has already pointed out, is just too great. Being merciful is the safest bet. Mercy is a work of faith.

This is what James means when he talks about faith without works being dead. He doesn't mean, as some have suggested, that we can earn or deserve our salvation by doing good works. That's not true. Nor doesn't James imply, as some – like the Puritan pilgrims – have inferred, that works which yield material prosperity are a sign of our divine election as chosen ones of God. Rather, James means that faith shows itself. Faith isn't a lump that just sits around doing nothing. Faith makes things happen. And of all the works that issue forth from faith like fruit from the vine, the work of mercy may be the greatest because it is the element that allows our love to stop playing favorites.

Mercy is like yeast that allows bread to rise, or the rare minerals that added in tiny quantities makes steel stronger. Mercy transforms our love and keeps us from being partial, in both meanings of the word; because when we are partial toward others by playing favorites, we end up making ourselves partial, because we sacrifice our wholeness in the choice.

It's tempting, I confess, to play favorites. None of us resist consistently. It's also tough to be merciful with people who scare or anger us or who are simply so different that they puzzle and disturb us. Yet playing favorites will get us nowhere on our journey of faith. The exact opposite behavior is what makes our faith real and alive and healthy.

If I could go back and do again the work I did as a teenager, I might just break with station policy, and tell people the truth about why I won't play their favorite song. And the truth is that every song on those six tapes is somebody's favorite, so we've got to play them all. I

think that is how God feels about us. Each of us is God's favorite song. Were we to feel the same toward others, it could be heaven on earth. Amen.