

Sermon based on *1 John 3:1-7*

First reading is *Acts 3: 12-19*

Gospel Reading is *Luke 24:36b-48*

"We don't have a favorite. We love all our children equally." That's pretty much the typical response parents are likely to give when quizzed by one of their offspring about whom they love best. But, according to a study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, that claim may well be fictional. In other words, the suspicion you had as a child that your parents had a favorite was probably correct.

The Wall Street Journal, commenting on the study, quoted a noted psychologist Ellen Weber Libby, the author of a book called, *The Favorite Child*, who agreed that in families, favoritism is as widespread as it is taboo. "Parents need to know that favoritism is normal," Libby said, and it exists in every family. The *Journal* article added that some parents may prefer a child who is more like them and that their favorite can change over time, with a parent preferring a child in a particular stage, such as in their infancy or teenage years.

While parents having a favorite child may be normal, the article goes on to acknowledge that when preferential treatment is consistently focused on just one child, or used to boost a parent's self-esteem, it can become unhealthy. It can leave the non-favored child vulnerable to depression and can cause the golden child to feel overly responsible for their parent's happiness. But, perhaps the most important finding of the study, is that when families are close overall, perceptions of favoritism don't typically have much of an impact.

Ok, so why all of this talk about parental favoritism? Well, the idea of a favorite child comes to mind when we read the first sentence found in this morning's second lesson. St. John writes, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." Ok, so if we are all considered to be sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, we might wonder, given the fact that we are all so different and unique: does God prefer some of us over others?

That is, of course, an unanswerable question. God doesn't really share that information with us and if he did, that would seem rather unusual given the fact that Jesus demonstrated the importance of humility and humbleness throughout his earthly ministry. And yet we do notice in some of the biblical stories found in the Old Testament that God seemingly preferred certain individuals over others, especially those who were not first born. For example: Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, David over all his older brothers. But those choices may have been based on certain abilities the chosen one possessed, that God may have wanted to employ, rather than God liking one more than the other.

Not to mention the fact that, in the Bible, the people of Israel understood themselves as God's chosen people. As Moses stated it, "For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?" And in the book of Malachi, God says, "I have loved you, ... But you say, 'How have you loved us?' Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says the Lord. Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau; I have made his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals." (Malachi 1:2-3).

"Jacob" and "Esau" do not refer to the individuals who had those names, but to the nations of Israel and Edom that had descended from those distant ancestors. In response to accusations from the people of Israel that God has not loved them, the Lord points to the then-current devastation of Edom. It seems that God is okay

with the Israelites understanding themselves as favored children. And yet, against all of that, we have biblical assertions that indicate that God wants everyone to be in His divine family. Assertions like:

"Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!" (Isaiah 45:22). "Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet" (Matthew 22:9). "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). "Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21).

Nonetheless, whether God has favorite children or not, some of us may feel like we are -- or *are not* -- among the favored. If things have gone pretty well for us, if we feel overly blessed and provided for then we may conceive of ourselves as being among God's favorites. But, if we've suffered a lot of losses and have had to deal with countless struggles throughout our earthly existence, we may feel that we aren't among his favorites.

And yet there's a problem with the later viewpoint. When we remember that the Israelites were God's chosen people, how do we explain all the persecution and the massacres the Jews have endured over the centuries? In other words, the good and bad things we experience during our time on this earth don't seem to be a way to measure God's love for us.

On the one hand, though, it might be argued, that those who preach the so-called prosperity gospel, and who have financially profited greatly by doing so, see themselves as God's favorite children. But that "gospel" is a distortion of the

biblical message. On the other hand, we may know people who have lived much of their lives far from God, who later repented and became grateful disciples, and who have said things like, "Why God would want me back is a mystery to me. I've wasted a lot of my life, but whatever I've got left is devoted to God." In essence it's as if these individuals are perhaps saying that they don't see themselves as among God's favorites, but they are glad to be on God's family roster, even if only in a humble or lowly position.

There's biblical evidence that the apostle Paul felt that way. At one point, he talks about the resurrected Christ appearing to many believers and last of all to him. Here's how *The Message* Bible records Paul's words on the subject in his 1st letter to the Corinthians: "[Christ] finally presented himself alive to *me*. It was fitting that I bring up the rear. I don't deserve to be included in that inner circle, as you well know, having spent all those early years trying my best to stamp God's church right out of existence."

That may also have been how the prodigal son felt when he finally headed for home, asking only to be made a servant in his father's household. Ironically, the welcome he received upon his return led his older brother to conclude that the prodigal was, in fact, the favorite child. And yet, the father's response to the older son seems to be his way of saying he loved both of his children.

Now, having said all of this, and having quoted a string of verses about God wanting everyone to be his children, we need be careful about not reducing this down to, "God loves everyone no matter what we do," because that's not what the Bible says. Jude, another biblical author, writes, "Keep yourselves in the love of God," which, of course, suggests that it's possible to remove ourselves from God's love. Jesus himself said something similar: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."

Don Carson, in his book, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, draws an analogy to help us understand what keeping ourselves in God's love means: "... there is a sense in which my love for my children is immutable, regardless of what they do. There is another sense in which they know well enough that they must remain in my love. If my teenagers break curfew for no good reason, the least they will experience is a bawling out, and they may come under some restrictive sanctions. There is no use reminding them that I am doing this because I love them. That is true, but the manifestation of my love for them when I ground them and when I take them out for a meal or attend one of their concerts or take my son fishing or my daughter on an excursion of some sort is rather different in the two senses. The latter will feel much more like remaining in my love than falling under my wrath."

So, in the end, our call is not to discern whether we are among God's favorites, but to consider what family responsibilities we have as his children. Yes, God loves us, but we can make God's love for us ineffective if we ignore the righteous living to which God calls us into. In one sense, it is true that we cannot drift beyond God's love. But it is also true that if we desire to be children of God, we need to give God the obedience that is expected of us. This was probably what John was getting at in our passage for today, when he said, "And all who have this hope in [God] purify themselves, just as he is pure." So, rather than taking God's love for granted, let us keep ourselves in that love.