

God's Favorites  
Luke 4:14-21

An alleged classified ad: LOST, one neutered dog, who has just half his teeth, one eye and three legs, and suffers from the mange. Answers to the name of Lucky.... What a wrong name for that dog... or is it? Is he unlucky because of all that is wrong with him, or lucky, because he is still alive, and has someone who cares enough to want him to be found?

Does God have favorites? What does it mean to be favored by God? Who are the favorites?

One difficulty we American Christians have is that we have been taught to equate God's favor with earthly success. If a girl grows up to be a beauty queen, her parents are told, "God has certainly blessed you with a beautiful girl." As if God cares one bit about physical beauty. When a player scores the winning basket, he will say, "I want to thank God for letting me score this bucket." As if, in a world still besmirched with racism, sin, poverty, and hunger, God's main interest is in a basketball game. Victories do not equal God's favor... and then again, defeats do not equal God's disfavor.

Usually, there is no harm in thinking that success equals favor. Because, let's face it, most of us here this morning are relatively good people and we live relatively blessed lives. We can sort of lull

ourselves into believing that all the good we have is a just reward from a just God.

But sometimes, the question, does God play favorites, becomes very personal. And usually when we feel as if for some reason God has chosen to disfavor us, when calamity strikes. Such as illness. Or divorce. Or failure. Or death of a loved one. And this is a difficult, unsettling time, when this happens. Suddenly we are looking at the underside of the coin: if my comfort was because of God's favor, am I now not favored?

Last Sunday was a difficult one for me. No not because of anything that happened at church; in fact I appreciated Anne's sermon, enjoyed teaching Sunday School and hanging out with a whole bunch of youth on Sunday night. No, last Sunday was difficult because it was a sad fifth anniversary, of my older brother's death. Those events are seared in my memory. John's cancer, only diagnosed a month before, suddenly taking a turn for the worse. I got the news on a Sunday, hopped in the car and began a desperate fourteen hour journey to arrive before he died. Hearing word he was losing consciousness, I stopped in Virginia and called him. He could understand me, we spoke a little. I got to the hospital in Concord, NH at 3:00 AM; he died around 6:30.

Was he favored by God, he who died so young at fifty? And what about we who are still alive in a world emptier and less appealing

because of the loved ones who have died or because of unexpected challenges and tragedies we must face?

But you see, promise and blessing, and God's favor, are at their deepest level spiritual concepts, and do not translate easily into our worldly notions of comfort, success, and special position, and even notions of life and death.

When we think of God's favor, we're still close enough to Christmas to think of Mary and of course, Jesus.

But their experience of favor is at a different level than fame or success. To be Christian is to accept as Lord one who was born in a manger, never had a home of his own, was betrayed by one of his closest friends, and denied by another, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, and died. God's favor upon Jesus was not readily seen by the world, through the values of the world. But through the eyes of faith, the eyes of love, the eyes of eternity, we see that special, unique, favor.

And what about Mary, Jesus mother, whose Godly favor is praised in the first chapter of Luke. Again, the paradox: Mary is the favored one by God, but God's favor leads her to walk ninety miles from Nazareth, to give birth in a barn, to flee desperately to Egypt when the child is still young, and to stand at the foot of the cross when he dies.

The special favor of God upon Mary and Jesus are not readily apparent to the world. But favored they are.

Now, turning to today's Scripture, we find what Luke records as Jesus' first public pronouncement. Luke does report that fame of Jesus has spread far and wide and that he has been teaching, but today is the first time we hear the content of that teaching.

Today Jesus, as is his custom, is at worship, in his hometown of Nazareth. They ask him to read the Scripture. From Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And in there is a Greek word in this passage, *suntribo*, which speaks has the connotation of being broken hearted or crushed, or devastated, and healing for these folks as well.

And then shocking words: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus has ushered in the year, the time, the new reality of God's favor. But look! It's favor not reserved for the few, the winners, the wealthy, the healthy, the in-crowd.

The time of God's favor is a time that embraces the poor, the sick, the blind, the imprisoned, and by extension, the lonely, the sorrowing,

the despairing, because there are many ways to be poor or imprisoned. It can be spiritual as well as physical.

The good news is: in Christ we know ourselves to be favored by God. In giving us Jesus, God has given us all the favor we will ever need: abundant life in the midst of every difficulty and the certainty of eternal life when our breath and our heart are stilled.

The more somber news is that as God's favor is not easily translated into worldly expectations of popularity, health, wealth, or influence.

So then what about us, what about you and me when we go through those terrible times? It's so easy to assume God favors us when our house is warm, our stomachs full, our children successful, our favorite team winning, our health outstanding, and our cats even allow us to sleep late on a Saturday.

But what about those other times? It's natural to believe that we are God-forsaken during those times of illness and tragedy and despair, those crushing times.

But dare we believe that instead these are times when God shows us even more favor? I think of my brother John and I will never say it was a good thing that he died so young. I don't see blessing in cancer grasping such a good man so young and I don't believe that God sends such things. I do believe that we live in a fallen world, one not

yet completely the way God wants it to be, a world in which virus and cancer and hurricane and poverty and hunger still ravage.

But I also believe this, that God gives us the gift of his favor, and in his favor, in his outlandish gift of his unconditional love, we find meaning and purpose and blessing.

God's favor five years ago? Perhaps it was God's favor that did not have me lose control of the car when I was driving on a bridge in Hartford, Connecticut and tears suddenly washed over me and almost blinded me. It was God's favor that brought John's two ex-wives to his bedside that last week to care for him to let him know despite rocky times he was still greatly loved. It was God's favor that gave John a peaceful death.

And remember that word *suntribo*? To be crushed, broken hearted. And during that week five years ago, as I felt crushed and broken hearted my self, yet the signs of God's favor flooded over me even in the midst of the sorrow. Kinko's, the copying place, allowed me to create and print bulletins at no cost. Bow Mills UMC, outside Concord, NH hosted the memorial service and the women provided lunch... and these were folks who had never met my brother.

And such signs of God's favor, mediated through kind and Christian people, sustained me then and sustain me now.

Five years ago was a difficult time for me. And last week's anniversary was difficult as well, for not even the reality of eternal life can mask the reality of loss and grief. Difficult, but not impossible, because I remembered and sensed and experienced again that special favor God has for the poor, the outcast, the broken hearted.

In his first public pronouncement Jesus announced that in him begins the year of God's favor. And in Jesus that year continues even to this very day. And God's favor, God giving us blessing in all circumstance, continues to this very day. And this favor is for you and it is for me, not because of who we are, but because of who God is, this God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.