

Playing No Favorites I Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22; Psalm 96:1-13; October 16, 2011

Year ago, Tommy Smothers often told his brother, Dick, “Mom always liked you best.” Just recently a study was produced that told us that parents often do favor one child over the others. This might have caused those of us who have more than one child, to wince a little. If we take a close look at our children we might discover that we did or do have a favorite. I don’t think that we do this intentionally, it just might happen. One child is easier to raise than another, or one is just like we are. We see qualities we like and we might subconsciously give more nods of approval to one sibling over another. If we do this, it is a sure thing the others will catch on after time, and say something very similar to Tom Smother’s comment.

Treating people with impartiality is difficult. We all have specific likes and dislikes. Jesus was not always happy with the religious leaders of his day. He felt that the way they practiced their faith was too legalistic, too bound to the letter of the law while ignoring the spirit. In this morning’s reading they had set out to trap him, again, by asking him about paying taxes. Basically, he said, “Be fair, give to the emperor what is the emperor’s and to God what is God’s.” His questioners knew not to press him any farther and so they withdrew to bide their time and await another opportunity to entrap him.

It is interesting to note that they understood he was impartial, that he appeared to treat everyone he encountered on the same basis. They sensed that he played no favorites and they could not quite grasp this. Evidently, they, in their narrow interpretation of their faith, could not see that Jesus was reflecting characteristics of the God they, too, worshipped. They preferred to believe that God did have favorites and that God certainly did not consider Jesus as one of them.

He was a man who was able to accept all comers while trying to further the kingdom of God. He had set aside the idea that he had come to serve only the Jews, the lost tribes of Israel, and had seen the human need and suffering all around him, regardless of social class or nationality. He could not be bothered with the silly questions of his opponents, there was too little time remaining for him to be sidetracked from his mission—that of sharing the love of God with Jew and Gentile alike.

Of course, we are called to the same mission. We are asked to set aside our narrow-minded-ness and to accept others in the manner of Christ. We are not to show any partiality to those who surround us, we are not to play favorites.

Following Jesus is never an easy task. It requires a lot of commitment and the ability to set aside the way we regard life and the people around us. It is a way that can bring us great peace when we stop judging others. And, who is it among us who could not use a little more peace?

Regrettably, it seems that as the years and centuries have gone by, those who claim to follow in the footsteps of Jesus have set up human boundaries that seek to separate us rather than to unite us under one umbrella of faith. We sometimes refuse to see others as the children of God and we return to drawing the same lines between us that existed in the time of Jesus. This is unfortunate, but all too human. To break down these barriers, we need to take the time to reflect more on where we have been and where we are going. We need to set a goal or two for ourselves and then work toward accomplishing them using the tenets of our faith to get there.

We need to set aside that part of us that judges others and wishes that they would conform to our view of what it is that constitutes the “right way of being and living.” We need to see and welcome the differences we all have and then embrace them knowing that what and who we are comes from God. We need to

understand that, as different as we may all be, we all have needs and desires in common.

People are wonderful in their various shapes and sizes, in the different ways they view the world, and in ways they reflect the God within them. Jesus was scorned and rejected because he offered a new world view—a view that many of us have embraced even though we do not put it fully into practice. He stepped outside the mold of what was considered as the right way to practice his faith. He changed the world and left his mark on it in the brief time he ministered to others.

We need to stop, from time to time, and ask ourselves how it is we have served others and sought the greatest good for the greatest number. How often have we set aside our own narrow desires and moved beyond our restrictive social circles to serve others? How often have we set aside things of lesser value to embrace and encourage the growth of the kingdom of God right where we live and move and have our being? How often have we gone on, weary to the bone, to carry out a mission that benefits those we touch? How often is it that we have reflected the inclusiveness of a God who loves us all?

Our answers to these questions vary for each of us. But, it is never too late to embrace a new, more generous way of living, one that plays no favorites but that embraces all. Amen