

Easter Sunday

A CROSS-BORN IMPARTIALITY

Acts 10:34-43

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Analysis by Bruce K. Modahl

34Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all. 37That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

DIAGNOSIS: A Fearful Partiality

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Partiality*

God reveals to Peter that God shows no partiality. The lexicon says the word used in the text for partiality and two related

words are found only in Christian writings. This partiality is never a good thing. Check out Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25, and James 2:1. Partiality leads to what Paul describes in Ephesians as “the dividing wall of hostility.” At Confirmation Camp youth and leaders joined in building a wall out of the materials at hand: stacks of chairs, garbage cans, brooms, and podiums. The leaders invited the youth to write on paper the names various groups in their schools had for each other. The leaders asked them to tape these to the wall as they discussed how these names helped to create dividing walls of hostility. There is no shortage of examples and it is easy for the preacher to spend the bulk of the sermon with the evidence. But we must press on.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Misplaced Fear*

Peter says “I truly understand... anyone who fears [God] and works righteousness is acceptable to him” (author’s translation). Luther had a good shorthand way for us to identify our false gods. Our god is whatever we fear, love, and trust. Our god is what or who we are most afraid of on any given day, what we trust in to deal with our fear, and where we hang our hearts. We fear those who are different. We place our trust in those who are like us. Our misplaced fear is idolatrous. It builds the walls of hostility. It destroys peace. It disfigures God’s good creation and the human community. It is one of the ways the devil oppresses us.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Not Acceptable*

“This is not acceptable,” is a statement used to criticize something another person has done. The statement is a judgment that stings us whether it comes from spouse, friend, peer, or disgruntled parishioner. It is not possible to hear it without also hearing the evaluation, “You are not acceptable.” The statement stings even more, fatally so, when it comes from God. Peter said, “Anyone who fears God and works righteousness is

acceptable to him.” That being the case those who show partiality and by that partiality reinforce dividing walls of hostility are not acceptable to God.

PROGNOSIS: Partial to All

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Rewriting the Script*

Partiality defines the old order. Those who have a personal stake in the old order (and that would be all of us) were threatened by Jesus who conducted his ministry in the borderlands with Jew and gentile. He showed no partiality to Pharisees, tax collectors, Roman occupiers, or sinners. He was partial to all. Such behavior was unacceptable and fatally so. They put him to death, Peter says, by hanging him on a tree. Scripture is clear, “Anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (Deut. 21:23). Jesus bears the curse for all who come under the curse of being unacceptable to God. God vindicates Jesus’ life of impartiality by raising him from the grave. The standard script in the old order calls for the vindicated hero to exact revenge on all enemies. Jesus rewrote the script when he did just the opposite. He invited his enemies to become his disciples. He invited his enemies into the reign of God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Fearful to the Core*

Somewhere John Calvin said having a proper fear of God makes us less afraid of everything else. It at least puts our other fears in perspective. A proper fear of God invades the core of our being at our baptism. By water and God’s Word of promise the Holy Spirit joins us to Jesus crucified and raised. Baptism puts the fear of God in us. It is the fear of one overwhelmed by the undeserved generosity of God. A remarkable series of verb forms begins at verse 36 that the following awkward translation tries to capture. Peter said, “You know the message [God] sent to the

people of Israel, good newsing, gospeling peace by Jesus Christ... That message spread after the baptism: how God christened Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about good-working." Then in verse 42 Peter says, [God] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that [Jesus] is the one ordained by God..." Luther taught that ordination did not confer a new status but a set of duties. For Luther baptism was the sacrament of ordination for the priesthood of all believers. Baptism changes our status before God. We become Jesus' sisters and brothers and heirs of God the Father. So, in the sequence of verb forms in the text good-newsing and christening precede good-working. A transformed life is the result of the Holy Spirit's work within us.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Living out God's Partiality to All*

In the summer of 1967 a group of black and white teenagers lived and worked together in Jacksonville, Florida in an endeavor called Ambassadors for Christ. This was not a safe thing to do in that time and place. Black and white teenage boys shared motel rooms. Black and white girls did the same. We went out two-by-two, one black and one white in each pair, knocking on doors, canvassing a neighborhood on behalf of a Lutheran Church comprised of mostly African Americans and located in an African American neighborhood. We witnessed to our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord of all. More often than not we heard a more eloquent witness from those who invited us into their homes. During that week race riots erupted in Tampa. Less than a year later an assassin gunned down Martin Luther King, Jr. Those invested in the old order continue to build the dividing walls of hostility. Yet, we know that wall is coming down. Jesus was crucified and raised. The new creation is at hand. In the course of that week we not only learned, we experienced, the truth. God shows no partiality.