

A challenge was extended to me this week to write what was termed, “The parable of the dog.” This was of course said as a joke when I lamented that I wasn’t sure what I was going to write about, and the joke is always, “Write about me,” in the tone of voice we tend to give Scully. And yet...when I took out my notes for this week...well...I don’t know about parable, but at the end of the day, dogs are always a good topic of conversation. Unless you’re a cat person and then I supposed shift it to, the parable of the cat.

My last week of 2022 was highlighted by the vast and various gift that is puppies. Kristin and Jon brought their ten month old, golden retriever puppy, Maggie to my mom’s for Christmas, and well, puppies are...puppies. She is this massive ball of fluff who doesn’t quite know the limits of her wiggles yet. She bounds everywhere with exuberance and when she isn’t getting the attention she wants, well, she decided that my mom’s bedroom was a great place to do her business. That was a fun morning. She found every Kleenex in the house and left a few scratches here and there. Yet, she’s also the sweetest puppy. When you pet her, if she’s in the mood for a hug, she will sit up on her haunches and wrap her paws around your forearms. She clearly adores my nephews and on more than one occasion bounded into my bed while I was attempting to nap just so she could say hi.

My days with Maggie were followed up with three days with my in-laws dog, Riley. I've talked about Riley before. He is a big rug of an Irish Setter, who in spite of his almost five years, is still a little bit of an empty vessel. There's not a lot of thought to Riley. He's happy to be along for the ride, following you wherever you go, butting his head under your hand, or taking up more than half of the couch. When we were getting ready to leave, I sat on the floor to pet him and he put his front paws between my legs and rested his head over my shoulder, content to cuddle until the very last minute. He too, is just about the sweetest dog.

And then...I got home to my dear mutt. Scully is just about the exact opposite of Riley and Mags. She doesn't particularly have a lot of chill bones in her body. She's loud and insistent and she was livid she had been at boarding for nine days, and yet...she is my sweetest dog. She knows when I need a snuggle, she loves when I pack my lunch, she enjoys nothing more than laying in the middle of the floor when I attempt to fold the laundry, and she's just generally the best. I mean, she's crazy, and while I was writing this, she pulled every piece of tissue paper out of a gift bag because I wasn't paying attention to her, but at the end of the day, she's mine. My sweet pup. And I know you're thinking, how in the world can three separate dogs *all* be the sweetest dogs, the best dogs. On the one hand,

I kind of want to quote a book I just finished recently where one character said, “Every dog is the cutest dog, how have you not learned that by now?” and on the other hand, I want to quote Peter in our second lesson, “God shows no partiality.” So sayeth the parable of the dog, but let’s also figure out what Peter is saying too, shall we?

Peter finds himself addressing a man named Cornelius and his family. Cornelius was a member of the Roman guard in Caesarea and during a dream an angel told him to send a dispatch to Joppa and request that Peter come to his house, so that’s exactly what he does. He sends for Peter and amazingly, Peter comes. He arrives at the house of this complete stranger, and has to wonder how exactly he has found himself here. I mean think about this situation...we aren’t *that* far removed in the Acts narrative from Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension. Peter’s life as the leader of the disciples is still fairly new, and the events of the last few years are fresh in his mind. He knows the life he, his family, and his friends have lived under Roman occupation. He knows, he has seen the things Roman centurions do when allowed to let their power run rampant. He knows that Rome was who killed his Lord, Savior, and friend. He knows that the centurions were the ones who stood guard at the cross and at the tomb, they were the ones who cast lots for Jesus’ clothes, and they were the one that carried out Jesus’

execution. So, for Peter, the home of a Roman centurion, is not exactly going to scream safe space to him.

Now, it is true, according to Acts, earlier in the chapter where our text comes from, Cornelius is described as a man of faith, leading his family in worship, praying, and helping those in need. So, he is a good man. But again, put yourself in Peter's shoes. We have no idea if he knew all of that, and at the end of the day, given all that he has went through, there could be a thought in his mind that a centurion is a centurion, and there is no differentiation between them. If Peter had his way, he too may show no partiality when it comes to Romans, but not in a great way. If one was bad, they all were bad. Yet...that's not what we find in the sermon he gives to Cornelius and his household.

Peter uses this moment, not to address the elephant in the room about the fact that Cornelius is a Roman guard, but to actually talk about how much he, Peter, has changed in his time since Jesus came into his life. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality..." A man who has lived his life under Roman rule, who has made an immense number of mistakes in his life, who has had a tendency to be outspoken and put his foot in his mouth more often than not, stands before this family of Gentiles and says he gets it now, and what he gets is that God loves them in the exact same way that

God loves him. They are complete opposites in pretty much everything, but in that, God's feelings towards them, they are entirely equal. He goes on to tell them the gospel, the story of Jesus' life, his death, and his resurrection, and he says that all of this was done for the forgiveness of sins, for all of humanity, for each of them gathered in that house, no lines drawn, no distinctions made, just grace and forgiveness from God, to *all* of God's people. In the words of the parable of dog, all dogs are good dogs, and all people are good people to God.

I'm not sure that were we in Peter's shoes we would have been so gracious, because unlike God, we tend to be partiality specialists. We can hear this lesson ad nauseum from here until Jesus' return and I think our instinct would be to say, wellllll, that's a nice sentiment, but God *has* to show some partiality because, I mean look at all these people. And we would then absolutely give our laundry list of people that we think God shouldn't be partial to let alone love, forgive, and care for, and I'm fairly certain that list would be long and extensive, ranging from the very broad to the deeply specific when it comes to our siblings.

I mean, give yourself a second to think about how many thoughts cross your mind during one 24 hour period that have to do with how much someone has frustrated you, annoyed you, or angered you to the point that

you want to just ignore they exist. If we are deeply and truly honest with ourselves, it would take more than a handful of seconds to think through all of them. The cashier at the grocery store who frustrated you who you labeled as ungrateful because they were distracted while they checked you out. The kid you passed on the street that you wrote off as good for nothing because they had tattoos and a few too many earrings. The pundit you saw on tv who you ridiculed and critiqued because they said something that you disagreed with. The family member that posted something annoying on Facebook that made you roll your eyes and say, “See? This is why I don’t talk to them.” The person of a different race or ethnicity that you passed judgment on without even talking to them because the narrative of prejudices and discrimination in our brains is loud. The couple we see out on a date that we scoff at because can’t they just keep that to themselves, all the while we sit with our significant other and hold hands or laugh or act normal like it’s no big deal. I could continue, but I’m pretty sure we all have the list going in our minds now.

But what if the narrative was reversed? What if God did show partiality, and we held ourselves well and truly up to the microscope? Would we live up to the colossal expectations we have put on our siblings for what is deserving of God’s love? Would we fit into the box we have

created that has been labeled, “Those who are well and truly deserving of what we think God is in the world?” Again, if we’re honest...I would bet we wouldn’t. I would almost guarantee that on our worst days, we absolutely wouldn’t, because after all God tends to have a lot of things to say about judgment and loving your neighbor and so if that list we created was legit, then that list has probably bounced us off of God’s agenda.

And yet...there are Peter’s words...God shows no partiality. We are all going to mess up and make our lists and regret the things that we say and try to learn from our mistakes and at the end of the day, God loves us in our flawed forms. The key is also remembering and valuing and rejoicing that God loves everyone else too. And if God loves them...it is our call to love them. That’s kind of part of our baptismal call, which we celebrate today. Letting our light so shine before others so that they might see our good works and glorify our God in heaven. Our light is shone through loving our neighbors, not judging them, not writing them off. God doesn’t show partiality and thank God for that. Now we have to live like we believe it, like is the greatest gospel truth we have heard and the only way we can do that is displaying it to those around us. If according to the parable of dog, I can hold that every dog is the sweetest dog, then we can all also work on holding that every human is God’s favorite human. **AMEN!!!**