

ALL MEANS ALL
Acts 10:34-43 (CEB)

Growing up watching television was a family pastime. These were primarily the days of *Father Knows Best*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Walton's*, and *Little House on the Prairie* – all wholesome family fare suitable for every age. During high school there were also a fair number of variety shows – *Sonny and Cher*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, *The Carpenters*, *Red Skelton*, and for a time, our very favorite *The Smother's Brothers*. Tommy and Dickey Smothers opened every show with a comedy routine – Tommy on the guitar and Dickey on the bass fiddle. They would share stories from their childhood which invariably always ended up with Tommy telling Dickey, “Well... that’s because Mom always loved you best!” Any of you remember this? Well, my siblings and I thought this routine was hysterical yet underneath it all, we were very aware that our Mom did have her favorites. The favorite child changed from time to time and while Mom would never say so, there was this unspoken awareness among the 6 of us that no matter how hard we might try, we would never measure up to the golden child of the moment. While this was a hard pill to swallow at times, in some ways it really prepared us for life.

In our text from Acts 10 this morning, Peter says, “God shows no partiality,” and by that he means there’s no favoritism, no preferential treatment. No one on this earth gets more love from God than any other person.

The Greek word translated “partiality” is uncommon. It condenses a Semitic expression that literally means “God is not one who receives human faces.” God doesn’t just glance at our faces and make a snap judgment, as so many of us do with our neighbors. God doesn’t stop with the externals. God looks deep within.

Think of the last time you were in a busy train or bus station, or at an airport. Remember the sea of faces surging toward you, displaying a variety of expressions, a range of emotions. Remember, also, the skin colors, the body types, the clothing, the hair styles, the tattoos. During my year at UVA as a chaplain, the hospital was an amazing conglomeration of persons from every walk of life representing every and any lifestyle fashion you could possibly imagine. It was also an incredibly diverse population – ethnically, economically, culturally and spiritually.

The human mind is a remarkable calculating engine. It draws so many conclusions in the barest instant of time. It makes judgments we’re scarcely aware of. Can you even recall a few of the judgments your mind made, based on those faces you observed there, in the station or airport? Did you not pigeonhole a good many of those faces, categorizing them as foreigner or native-born, rich or poor, lazy or hard-working, dangerous or benign?

If so, *you did what Peter says God never does*. You “received human faces.” You made a multitude of judgments, based on very little information at all. We all do this. We do this, in part, as a way of assessing our daily life situations. We live in a world where our very safety can depend on our ability to correctly assess our surroundings. This can become problematic, however, when it causes us to discount people based on some very shallow preconceived notions.

When I was a freshman at Salve Regina College in Newport, Rhode Island, I had an experience where this very thing happened, and it is something that makes me ashamed to this very day.

Newport, R.I. was then a navy town, not unlike Norfolk, Virginia. Salve was a women's college and the closest all male college was a 90-minute bus ride away. My dorm mates and I quickly learned that navy "boys" were much more polite and well-mannered toward the college girls, than any of the fraternity brothers! On one particular night on the town I met a young sailor from Georgia. He was cute, sweet and when he asked me for my dorm phone number, I willingly gave it to him. Well, somewhat to my surprise he called the dorm phone to make a date with me, and here is where my northern prejudice kicked into high gear. Being a Georgia boy, he had this lovely southern drawl. Well, in my sheltered upbringing, I had been taught that people who spoke with southern accents were neither very well educated, nor intelligent, so I would not take his calls. What appalling behavior on my part and I have wished time and time again that I could apologize to that young man.

Peter said, "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Something that's partial is fragmentary, a piece of the whole. Human love is partial in just that sense. So many mixed motives affect our love for other people. Self-interest creeps in, spoiling the selfless, altruistic love to which we seek."

There are lots of examples of partial, limited love. One of my resources listed three of them.

Loving the lovable. Often, the only love we're able to manage is *loving the lovable*. That's a curious word, "lovable." Usually, when we say a person is lovable, we mean the person is attractive, pleasing, gifted in some way, so as to win the affection of others. By definition, a lovable person is not hard to love.

But, does God call us only to love the lovable? Of course not! When Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself," he doesn't add the codicil, "that is, if your neighbor happens to be lovable." What kind of love would that be? Pretty shallow! No, the sort of love Jesus is encouraging is not about being attracted to another, as a moth is drawn by a porch light. It is, rather, the sort of love that gets up and does what the other person needs, no matter how tough that may be. So, that's one kind of partial love: loving only the lovable.

Reciprocal love. Another type of partial love is all about gauging our love according to the possibility of receiving love in return. This is *reciprocal love*: "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." Lots of human relationships are like that. It's a fine and helpful thing for two people to decide they're going to come together and meet each other's needs. Often, we refer to this sort of love as a "partnership," highlighting the even exchange. (Homiletics Online, 2014)

Yet, this, too, is only a partial love. What happens, for example, if one partner gets sick and is unable for a time to care for the partner's needs? Does the love-partnership fall apart at that point? Some do. Plenty of couples have headed for separation or divorce out of a sense of unfairness, when one partner comes to believe the even exchange is no longer so even. The other partner is not holding up his or her end, is not doing enough. Any love that keeps score in such a way is only a partial love. It doesn't measure up to the ideal of selflessly caring for the other.

You and I know well, there are times and seasons, in many marriages, or in some deep friendships, when one partner does end up carrying more of the weight of the relationship. That's not the way it was meant to be, of course, but sometimes it's just the way it is. The simple truth is that, if

we're in a reciprocal relationship, there's always the temptation to engage in scorekeeping. So that's the second kind of partial love: reciprocal love.

The final sort of partial love is *controlling love*. We've all known people like that: a spouse or a parent or someone else. An element of control often makes its way into human relationships. In such relationships, love is offered for a time, free and clear, then abruptly snatched away. Afterwards, love is usually kept in storage, to be trundled out the next time the controlling lover has need of it.

Controlling love, too, falls short of the full measure of love, the biblical ideal. By and large, controlling love is not the sort of love we see God exercising in the Bible. You'd think it would be just that way, in the uneven power-relationship of an omnipotent God and a frail and flawed people. But it's not. The track of God's love for Israel – several millennia long but still in effect – has had some rocky interludes. Even on their epic journey through the wilderness, the people of Israel sometimes acted foolishly and disobediently. God had to dispatch the prophets, one by one, to call them back to faithfulness. Were God's love controlling them, that never would have happened. But God's love is never a controlling love. The Lord values human freedom, knowing full well there are going to be times – lots of times, to be perfectly honest – when we'll greedily snatch up that freedom, then go out and abuse it.

That's not how it is with God's love. The love God offers is utterly free – in the sense that we are always free to accept or reject it. Yes, it's true that if we wander away from the fold, God will go after us, as a shepherd seeks the lost sheep. But God never prevents us from leaving. The gate to the sheepfold is always open. God wants you and me to freely choose to be in relationship with Him through the risen Jesus Christ.

It's not that there's anything terrible about these three limited types of love – loving the lovable, reciprocal love and controlling love. They are still examples of love, and love is the one power in the universe that's universally good, even in partial form. A love that loves only the lovable can be shallow, but, as far as it goes, it's still love. A love that demands to be paid back can still bring much joy, as long as the other partner in the exchange continues to deliver. Even a controlling love can yield some benefits, contributing to the loved one's sense of worth.

This makes me wonder, however, what complete love looks like?

Jesus gets at this when he teaches, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Can there be a more difficult teaching than that? Think of a terrorist event like the Boston Marathon Bombing. Remember the fear and anger that riveted the nation that day, and in the days of the manhunt that followed. Remember the wild speculation in the news media about who had committed this outrage, what links they might have had to terrorist organizations, and – most troubling – whether similar bombings might soon follow, in a coordinated assault on American democracy?

Then, a teenager was discovered cowering under the cover of a boat up on blocks in someone's driveway. He was wounded and bleeding. He was an American kid – yes, foreign-born, but he did most of his growing-up here. He seemed so normal. His school friends had no idea. By all accounts, he had come under the spell of his charismatic, but deeply troubled, big brother. There's

little doubt he was guilty of a crime against humanity. The law offers little mercy to one such as he. Life in prison, with no parole, is the very best he can hope for.

Does Jesus really expect us to love him? Do you think Jesus really expects us to be anything other than partial in our loving? Truth be told, we're sinners, so he probably doesn't expect that much. Yet, he places the ideal of selfless love out there before us, all the same. He sets the bar high. This life of Christian discipleship is a matter of reaching onward and upward after his example, trying our best to live as he lives, to love as he loves.

One thing we can say about this divine adventure called love. When we're in relationship with Jesus, when we allow his love to flow into us, then flow outward again into our flawed and fragile human relationships, we become capable of a deeper and more faithful way of loving. In a very real sense, the love we extend to others, at our best, is not partial at all. It is the full and complete love of Christ, which comes to us as an unmerited gift and that overflows into the lives of our friends and family and neighbors – and yes, sometimes even perfect strangers.

You see, Jesus did not come only for good Christian boys and girls; He came for all of God's children – the mixed up, the angry, hurting, as well as the “stuck up” college freshman in Rhode Island! I for one am so grateful that in God's eyes we are all the same, where all means all!!

This is indeed worth pondering. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.