

“For Fans of Reader’s Digest”

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Acts 10:34-43

If you’re a fan of Reader’s Digest, you will love today’s scripture. Did you notice in this sermon that Peter preached, it’s only 10 verses long? Can you imagine that? Most of us preachers kind of operate by this philosophy: “Never use 10 words when 20 will do.” Bill Tabbernee from the seminary was here last Sunday. He will tell you that they don’t teach that at the seminary, but somehow ministers just assume it is so. Simon Peter didn’t, however. Did you hear in the scripture that he told us nearly everything that was important about the life of Jesus—his ministry, his healing? He taught us about God in only 10 verses.

Martin Luther was known for his extensive and exhaustive writings, but he also appreciated brevity. When Martin Luther talked about John 3:16, he said “It is the gospel in miniature.”

I have something to show you this morning. I have not thought of it for quite some time until I started working on this sermon. I don’t know if you can tell what this is or not, it just looks like a little piece of red plastic. There’s a handle here, and if you pull this down and push this up, there’s a knife. Now, it’s not much of a knife, just maybe a letter opener. After all, it is made out of plastic. If you have ever seen a knife like this, you know it’s often used for advertising. The company can put their name here on the back. I don’t know if many of you can read what it says on here. (If you can, it’s amazing because I can’t read it and I’m holding it right here.) It’s worn off after all the years. The man who gave this to me actually owned an advertising company. He had his name and phone number printed on the back of this knife, and he handed them out to advertise his company.

Let me tell you about the knife that I received many years ago. It was either in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School, but they handed out knives. Now think about that. Can you imagine a child coming home from Vacation Bible School today and Mom says, “What did they give you, son?” And you reply, “Well, they gave us knives.” That knife wasn’t plastic—I don’t know if they even had plastic back then. The handle was made out of genuine fake mother-of-pearl. On the side of the knife were the inscribed words, “For God so loved . . .” and the verse was cited, John 3:16.

My, how times have changed haven’t they? I can’t imagine us handing anything out like that to the children in Sunday School, but if we handed out anything that cited a scripture, we could use something even shorter than “For God so loved the world.” God shows no partiality. What can we learn about God? God has no favorites. Remember the Smothers Brothers and their act, “Mom always liked you more than she liked

me.” Some parents think that coaches play favorites, especially if their child isn’t playing enough. They say, “Well, the coach just plays favorites.” Let me tell you something, coaches want to win. They don’t play favorites. They play the players that will help them to win. Parents, if their children aren’t playing, think the coach plays favorites. Coaches, if they are good coaches, don’t play favorites. They play the players who will help them win.

This scripture says to us today that on God’s team, God doesn’t play favorites. God doesn’t choose some people over others. God loves the person who drives me crazy. Let me tell you about one coach who drives me crazy—Bobby Knight, who coaches at Texas Tech now. Take Bobby Knight, for example. *PLEASE* take Bobby Knight. Bobby Knight drives me crazy. He is a bully. He bullies his players. If you’ve read about him, he bullies secretaries who work for him. But you know what? God loves Bobby Knight as much as God loves me. Think about the person you just can’t stand, then realize that God loves that person as much as God loves you. You know what we do to some people when they don’t live up to our expectations, when they don’t do what we want them to do, when they don’t act the way we want them to act? We just write them off. God doesn’t write anyone off. A part of the message is this: if you are going to spend eternity with someone, don’t you think it might be a good idea to start to get along with them now?

There are no divisions in heaven. Mike, I’m a man, I’m 40, Gundy, might be seated right next to Bob, Mr. Warmth, no personality Stoops.

There are no divisions in heaven. You might be a person who loves traditional music. When you hear traditional music, it’s like hearing the angels singing and you feel close to God, and contemporary music just drives you nuts. Or you might be a fan of contemporary music and traditional music just puts you to sleep. When you get to heaven, chances are you will be seated in a pew right next to a person who feels just the opposite of how you feel. If they are playing the kind of music you don’t like you might think to yourself, “You know, if this is the kind of music they’re going to play up here, I’d rather be in hell.” As soon as you think that thought, St. Peter will be standing there in front of you and say, “We can arrange that for you!” No divisions.

I came across these words that I love about our scripture today.

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality,” Simon Peter said. The biblical idea that God has chosen a particular people as object of special regard cultivates the dangerous suspicion that God did not therefore choose others. Those believers, who think themselves among God’s ‘elect’ are often inclined on this theological basis to think that God has not chosen anyone else who disagrees with their beliefs or customs. We pin labels on disagreeable opponents to disenfranchise them: they are ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’ or ‘homosexual’ or ‘straight’ or ‘Jewish’ or ‘Muslim’ or ‘Lutheran’ or ‘Catholic’ or ‘female’ or ‘male’ or

‘laity’ or ‘clergy’ or ‘black’ or ‘white’ or ‘divorced’ or married’ or single.’ Yet, what has become crystal clear to Peter is that to do so is not the prerogative of pious Israel or anyone else: It is God alone who judges the living and the dead. One of the most surprising features of Acts is the diversity of people God calls to be included among God’s people.” Robert Wall

This scripture was a turning point for Simon Peter. I like to read Reader’s Digest, but I realize there are times when you need to read the rest of the story. Just prior to our scripture today, Peter has had a vision. It is a strange kind of thing. There is a sheet dropped down from heaven, being held by all four corners. The sheet opens up and there are all kinds of animals—birds of the air, and a voice says to Peter, “They are all clean. You can eat anything you want.” If you read closely, you’ll notice that broccoli and brussels sprouts are not mentioned, so I’m still not sure if they are clean. Peter took this vision to mean that he could accept Cornelius and his household. He could reach out to gentiles. The gospel was for all people because Jesus is Lord of all.

Some of you have heard of Ken Medema. He is a wonderful singer who just happens to be blind. I heard Ken Medema in concert one time, and between songs he would stop and tell stories. One story he told was fascinating. Ken Medema is a member of a Baptist church in San Francisco. He told the story of how this little church started growing because they started baptizing anyone who came to the church. He said, “That’s what Baptists do. We baptize anyone we can get our hands on.” It seemed good, but they were criticized by the leadership of the Baptist church. The leadership said, “You guys are baptizing some people who shouldn’t be baptized.” Jesus is Lord of all.

Peter said something that we need to hear, and it struck me, especially after what happened a few weeks ago. It’s a strange way of talking about the crucifixion of Jesus. He said, “They hung him from a tree.” Have you driven around any of the neighborhoods in Tulsa and the surrounding communities that were just devastated by the ice storm? Trees lying against houses, broken branches and limbs? “They hung him from a tree.” From a tree, we can learn this lesson: No matter how good a Christian you are, if you go to church every Sunday, if you pray every day, if you do all the things that you know God wants you to do, you go outside and your trees are just as damaged as the person next door to you who never attends church.

There is a school of thought in the church that says today, “You will be blessed by God if you’re just good enough.” But they lose sight of the fact that to be blessed by God means a cross. Remember, that’s what happened to God’s own son. God blessed his own son with a cross.

For me, perhaps the most meaningful words in our scripture today have to do with this table to which we will come in just a few moments. Peter said, “After Jesus

was raised from the dead, he didn't appear to everyone." God chose some witnesses. He appeared to those who ate and drank with him. In a few moments that's what we are going to do. We are going to eat and drink with the risen Christ because God has chosen us as witnesses to share the Good News that God shows no partiality. We come to this table not to get away from the world, but to get closer to God. . . and God's children.

There's a book by the name of Earth's Garden. Hear just a few words from this book:

"If we cannot see God in the stranger, we will soon lose sight of God in the Church. We must find God even in our enemy, or we will soon lose God in our friend. Christianity is not merely a doctrine or a system of beliefs; it is Christ living in all—uniting us healing us, and perfecting us by his universal love.

"God loves us. That fact has nothing to do with our worth, our race, our beliefs, our citizenship, or our being lovable. It has nothing to do with any of these superficial, artificial divisions of humanity. But it has everything to do with God. Love is God's nature and will; God is love.

"I call upon us in this new year to work for God's desired unity. First, to work for this unity and in little ways to reach out to the stranger. Secondly, to pray as Jesus prayed: 'That they may all be one.' Thirdly, to do all within our human reach, to never again participate in anything that is divisive, judgmental, or destructive." Henry Roberts

Over 50 years ago I received a knife as a gift from my church. I wonder if that might be some kind of metaphor for how we have treated certain people? We have cut them, we have stabbed them in the back, we have caused them pain. I don't know, maybe today we need to hand out a box of Band-Aids to our children to symbolize the healing that the living Christ offers; the healing that Christ expects us to offer. May it be so for each of us today. Amen