**Does God Like Some People More Than Others?**

**Isaiah 58:6-11; I Timothy 6:17-19**

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 Last Sunday evening, our senior high youth and their counselors had the opportunity to experience a poverty simulation.  Volunteers from the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice came and walked the youth through an exercise in which they were put in households and given a set of limitations that defined their life circumstances.  For example, there might be a single working parent who had to try to find affordable child care, pay the bills, go everywhere by public transportation, feed her family, etc. As the simulation went on, new factors were introduced.  Someone got sick, the family didn’t have any money for food or to pay for utilities, Child Protective Services showed up, and so on. Everyone who participated learned just how frustrating and difficult it can be to try to make it in our world today when you have little or no money.

After it was over, one of the youth counselors suggested we might invite ICPJ back to do the simulation with anyone in the congregation who is interested, and I like that idea.  I feel like it’s one of those things that, like renewing your CPR certification, we as people living in the United States, and we as Christians, ought to be required to do every few years.  It’s so easy for us to forget just how privileged most of us are. We live in a bubble protected from the realities of most of the rest of the world. And most of us don’t feel like we have such an extraordinary amount of wealth or opportunity.  But, if you live in the United States and have an income of $25,000 a year, you are in the top two percent of the wealthiest people in the world. If you make $32,000, you’re in the top one percent. Ouch.

We are nearing the end of our sermon series based on your questions.  On Christmas Eve, we invited you to write down your three biggest questions about faith, God, religion, Jesus, church, whatever.  We went through them and figured out the six most common questions and used them to create this sermon series.

The last two in the series, this week’s and next week’s, have a lot in common because they both have to do with how God relates to humanity. Next week, our topic is God and suffering or why do bad things happen to good people.  Rather than one or the other of us preaching, Nick and I are actually going to address that question in dialogue with each other.

This week has to do with whether God likes some people more than others - or, to put it another way, God and the problem of privilege.  Here are some examples of how this question was put to us. "Why do some people have so much and some have so little?  Where does privilege work into God's plan for humans? Why would God create such disparities?  Does God care about the unnoticed? Does God care about the forgotten?”

When we talk about privilege, we’re really talking about the fact that some people, by virtue of where they were born, the family they were born into, the color of their skin, their gender, and their sexual orientation. Some people have social and material advantages that others don’t.  They didn’t do anything to earn those advantages - they were born with them. Much like we don’t do anything to earn God’s love and grace - it is just there for us.

But somewhere along the line Christians, particularly American Christians, came up with the fallacy that having these privileges meant that we were favored by God.  The growth and wealth of our country somehow got all entangled in a theology that said God chose us to be the recipients of all that this country has to offer. That we are somehow special to God - God’s favorites.

This line of thinking is based on the idea that privilege is part of God’s plan for humanity.  That God rewards some people and punishes others. But, I just don’t believe that true. Scripture tells us that God created the world and humanity and called it good.  He called us good; all of us. God created us in God’s image meaning we are loving, compassionate, kind, just, and generous. However, none of those qualities mean much if we don’t choose to use them.  The power of love is in our choice to be loving.

So, God also created us with free will, the freedom to choose how we will respond to each other, to God, to whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.  And that is the source of privilege and the cause of the disparities between people in the world.

Of course, we know that by virtue of living in this country, we have so much more than most of the world. We know that around the world, people with light skin are more likely to have access to health care, to clean water, to nourishing food, and to education than people with dark skin.  We know that men are paid more than women for the same work, and that gay men get beat up outside of bars in the city of Chicago. We know all of those things are true - but they have nothing to do with God and everything to do with systems of injustice and discrimination that humanity put in place centuries, millennia, ago.

Humanity has the capability to be loving and just, and when we are, we reflect the image of God.  But, we also have the capability to be hateful and afraid, to seek power over others, to take more than our share of resources. That’s not God’s choice for us.  That’s the choice we make.

In preparing for this sermon, I’ve been reading Walter Wink’s book, The Powers That Be: Theology For A New Millennium.  Wink does an admirable job of describing how, over thousands of years, the systems that lead to privilege have evolved.  He discusses how civilization grew over time and humanity came to need the organization and structure of communities and government, of economic and political systems.  And with those came the means to create systems that favored some people and excluded others. Over time, these systems became more and more intertwined with each other to create a complex system of power Wink calls the Domination System.  The Bible calls it the powers and principalities. Wink points out that the system itself, the structures we have for living together, are not intrinsically evil - in fact, they can work with God for the greater good of humanity. But, they have been co-opted by idolatry.  When we, as humans, value wealth, power, and protectionism over dignity, compassion, health, and wholeness, we use the systems toward our individual or national good rather than the good of all.

Throughout the Bible, whether in the Old Testament or the New, if God shows favor, it is always to those who are suffering, usually at the hands of the Domination System.

Exodus 22:21 “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.”

Psalm 82:3  “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.”

Proverbs 31:8-9 “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

Deuteronomy 15:7“If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.

Matthew 25:34-36“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me.’”

 Luke 6:20-21 - Looking at his disciples, [Jesus] said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”

 There are more than 2,000 scripture verses about poverty and justice.  I can’t begin to read them all!

 So, does God like some people more than others?  No, God does not distinguish one human group from another or bless one more than another.  What God does do is insist on justice, a fair distribution of resources, and an equal opportunity for a whole and healthy life for all God’s people.

 And what that means for us, for the people who follow God’s son, is that we are called to live counter-culturally, to live in such a way that we don’t participate in the systems that support and nurture privilege but, rather, we demonstrate another way. In both our reading from Isaiah and the reading from I Timothy for today, we learn what that looks like.  We are called to loosen the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, feed the hungry, house the homeless, to do good, be generous, and share. That is and always has been the mission of the United Methodist Women whom we celebrate this weekend. It is, and always has been, the mission of the United Methodist Church, when we are true to our calling. And it is the mission of each of us as we live out our lives in a world dominated by the powers and principalities.  We’re called to demonstrate a way of relationship based on love rather than hate, sharing rather hoarding, acceptance rather than exclusion, and justice rather than oppression.

 May it be so. Amen.