

*'Stumbling over God's Particularity'*

Based on Exodus 19:3-6, Romans 5:1-5, and Matthew 9:35-10:8

Delivered on Sunday, June 14, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

Let's go back to 1987, the summer I turned 9 years old because it is one that I will never forget. That year, my brother and his Babe Ruth League All-Star team took us on a magical ride. You see my brother was a phenomenal left-handed pitcher with a strong arm. But perhaps more impressive in this league for 13 to 15-year-olds, was that he had a curveball that seemed to just drop off the table. He was truly absolutely unhittable. Add in a couple of other great arms, some great hitters, and a group of solid coaches, and this team, well it was destined to go somewhere, and my mom and dad followed, with me and my sister.

Yet, what I remember most vividly about that summer was not the baseball games. Sure, I do remember a few remarkable moments, comebacks and thrilling victories, and I can remember staying in motels and when our car broke down, but most vivid, is my father's incredible streak of 50/50 raffle wins. Seriously, my father loved to play the lottery and assorted games of chance, and boy was he on a roll in the summer of 1987 at these tournaments. It didn't matter where – in Saugerties, in Kingston, East Greenbush, or way out in Warren, Pennsylvania – He won the 50/50 raffle, and it seemed like he won every single time.

But that would be ridiculous, you are probably saying to yourself, he's remembering wrong. Well, you're right – Pop didn't really win every single 50/50 raffle that year, but what I do remember that he won a lot of them, at least six times or more, and he won every single one he played when he was with his friend Arnie.

You see, Arnie had a kid on the team too, and if my father bought the tickets before Arnie, or the tickets after Arnie, it was a guarantee, or so it seemed, that my father would win. Out of hundreds of tickets sold, somehow my father kept winning this way. It became such a ridiculous distraction and its own little side show, as our families travelled from town to town following this team.

At one game, out in Western Pennsylvania, Arnie tested Pop's luck. Arnie bought 10 tickets, then let my father buy 1. Then Arnie bought the next 10 tickets. As the number drawn was read out loud, Arnie anxiously and excitedly looked over his tickets. The first number, second and third, all matched – it was clear the winner was in our stands. The fourth number was called and our section of the stands grew more excited, and the fifth number came, and Arnie knew this was finally his raffle to win. And then it happened – one ticket matched all six numbers – and my father held up that ticket – Yes, Pop had won again.

I remember an eruption of amazement, laughter & frustration, as yet again, my father standing next to Arnie, took home yet another 50/50 prize. It was scandalous to some – "HOW?" they asked, and "WHY does he keep winning?" I remember hearing, "Let someone else win Frank!" as if my father had done wrong, and I even remember my father feeling a little bad at the time, but he kept thinking that there was no way he was going to keep winning. He was generous with his prizes, but it's not like we were wealthy, so that money helped make up for the time he took off work, and the cost of the transmission that broke, way out in middle-of-nowhere Pennsylvania.

Thinking of it all, I can remember the feeling of excitement and amazement at his run, and especially feelings of jealousy, those who felt it was not fair that he won so much. I think games of chance can reveal how a person understands God, even if that person professes to have no belief in God at all. I had a friend who loved to play poker and tried to study the game. He worked on his discipline to play only the best cards. He tried to always make sound choices based on odds, and for the most part, he was really good.

Except, there was no one in our group of poker players who would scream louder, who would get more upset when someone would get lucky and beat him. What was odd, is that in most any other circumstance, he was the calm one – I was the bigger hothead in general. Yet when he had the best hand and an almost 100 percent chance to win, if someone got a one-in-a-million draw on the last card to beat him, the cries of injustice came out loud and clear. I remember wondering ‘who is he making his appeal to?’

Often, a belief in God is a belief that there is some being who is truly governing all fairness, as though the divine prerogative is to maintain an evenhanded bureaucracy. We say that God loves all of us equally and struggle with any particularity, yet, the truth is, that what we really want is to be the special ones, and impose a fairness doctrine only when others get what we want.

In this way, we try to use the image of an even-handed bureaucrat for our personal advantage. For instance, my friend the poker player didn’t want fairness—He wanted to win. Likewise, those who were most upset by my father winning all those raffles, didn’t want – as they claimed – for ‘anyone else’ to have a chance to win. No, if we’re honest, they wanted Pop to stop to increase their odds, and his friend even tried to limit my father’s chances to win, yet even at 1 in 200+ odds – every time, Pop won.

Today’s scriptures should challenge ours or any view of God as an evenhanded bureaucrat. Because in these scriptures, we see God playing favorites to accomplish God’s purposes. For many of us, this can be a stumbling block – why does God play favorites? We wonder why God would choose just one nation to call “treasured.” Indeed, in the stories we hold as sacred revelation of God at work, we see God choosing to work with one insignificant nation, a nation made up of 12 tribes speaking Hebrew. God led them out of a great empire in Egypt, into the wilderness to wander, but called them “treasured.”

Indeed, God tells Moses that the whole earth – meaning every nation – belongs to God, but it is Israel that is chosen to be the priestly Kingdom and a holy nation, set apart by God (holy), to be the link between the One True God and all of humanity (priestly). This started when God called out an 80-year-old man and his wife, promising him a family that would become a light to all nations. Indeed, Paul says all of us can now to be called children of Abraham and Sarah, but not as descendants of their only son Isaac, his son Jacob or the 12 tribes, but by our faith in and the faithfulness of God’s one and only Son Jesus.

Yes, by this, we are made right with God, to reflect God’s image, with God’s love in our hearts, through the Holy Spirit. And, what’s more, God didn’t just choose all of the descendants of Abraham to bring this light, nor did God choose all 12 tribes descending from Abraham’s great grandkids to shine, but it was one tribe – the Jews who are descended from Israel’s son Judah – and from Judah’s

descendants, God chose to call One the 'beloved Son,' indeed, God's own Word made flesh to be the light of the world.

This is called in theological terms – the scandal of particularity – that through just one person, God would enact the salvation of the whole world by His life, death and resurrection. It's called a scandal, because it is for many, a stumbling block to Christianity, to consider it equally possible that God both loves every human the same, and yet, God would choose one group, one nation, at one time, to pay particular attention to, to use for a specific purpose, and then offer the fullness of divine love by one means: Faith in Jesus as the embodiment of God with us, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

It is a stumbling block because it messes with that view of God as an even-handed bureaucrat. But the God of our scripture has always been revealed to the general or wider world, by working through particular people, in particular circumstances, with particular roles in the story of God's creation and its redemption. It all came to a head with Jesus, but it continued in this manner, through the Apostles and the church, and it continues today.

What's remarkable too, is that time and time again the general get offended or feel left out, like the son who is upset that the father has welcomed back the Prodigal Son, or the 99 sheep who are left alone while the good shepherd seeks out the one, or the Pharisees who wonder why Jesus loves those they deem sinners. This is how we feel until we see ourselves in the particular, and see God's universal love, coming to us to be present in us, with the gift of the Holy Spirit as God's love in us.

In Matthew's gospel, shortly before the section we read a few moments ago, Jesus finishes the Sermon on the Mount and then goes on a spree of miracles, and most of these miracles present a real and present danger to the status quo. Jesus touches a leper, a man considered unclean, making Jesus unclean. Jesus heals the servant of a Roman Centurion, thus aiding the enemy, and He has the audacity to proclaim that the soldier had more faith than anyone in Israel. After then after Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, Matthew calls Jesus the Messiah in Isaiah 53, "bearing our iniquities."

But that was not the end: Jesus pushes away some half-hearted followers, then He demonstrates control over the wind and waves – something only God can do. He heals two demon possessed men, sending their demons into some pigs, effectively prioritizing these two lives over a whole village's economy. Jesus then heals a paralytic, but only after forgiving his sins, again, something that only God has authority to do. Then Jesus calls Matthew to be a disciple, even though Matthew was a hated tax collector, but what's more, Jesus addresses this notion of God's particularity, saying he has come for the sick, not the healthy who do not need a doctor.

Jesus then refuses to rebuke a bleeding woman who touches him, again making Him unclean, but heals her and then raises a young girl from the dead, upending the belief that the dead remain dead. He heals two blind men – something no prophet had ever done in the Old Testament, and then casts out another demon from a mute man.

Yes, indeed each of these actions upsets the apple cart of the power brokers around Jesus. This is when Jesus sees the crowds, the common people, a multitude of regular folk, and moves from His particular work, to a more general outreach in a sense. You see, Jesus looked upon the Jewish people living in Galilee, and saw them as troubled and tossed aside by the ruling powers, as sheep

in need of a shepherd to guide them. And so, Jesus ordains 12 of His disciples, like the original 12 tribes of Israel, and makes them Apostles, sent out, to do exactly what Jesus had done, preach the good news, cast out demons, heal the sick.

But in this broad approach, Jesus is still particular, sending them first to the lost sheep of Israel. He says do not go out to the Gentiles, or to the Samaritans who have Israelite ancestry, but very specifically, Jesus sends them two by two to a particular group of people. It isn't that Jesus doesn't love Gentiles or Samaritans or that He doesn't want them saved. Jesus had just included them in His own miracles, but now He has another purpose. In sending the Apostles to the lost sheep, Jesus may be giving the House of Israel priority, but it may also be that in the Galilean landscape, those are who he saw as troubled, the people he saw as tossed aside by the ruling powers, the ones most in need of the good news of God's justice right then.

And so, my friends, I point this out to you because I do not want you to be discouraged. Ultimately, the promise of God is for heaven and earth to be renewed and restored, joined together so that the dwelling place of God will eternally be with humans. In this, there will not be the pain and sorrow we see in this world today. God will wipe every tear from our eyes, and death will be no more. All of God's people will be equal and united in Christ eternally, raised to new life with Jesus to live as God intended, with God and reflecting God's image in all things, knowing the immense goodness of God. But in the meantime, do not be afraid of the injustice and inequality of this era.

We as Christians are called to live now in the Kingdom of God, to do God's work, because it is here now, and still, it is yet to come in the fulfillment I just described. Our job is to see where God is working in the particulars by who God calls, and also, who needs special attention to know the love of God now. Our work must not be centered on our own effort to create the Kingdom for ourselves, but to reveal the Kingdom to others by our self-giving love and mercy, rejecting the temptations of this world to protect our power and comfort.

Throughout all of time, God has used the particular to reach us all. I don't know why God gave my father a little extra attention that summer, but I believe that even in something so trivial as winning 50/50 raffles God is at work. It's not that God is our magician, answering every want if we ask right, but that God is present in the good and the bad, our struggles and our joys, calling us to mourn with those who mourn, rejoice with those who rejoice.

In these uncertain times, as we see so much pain and suffering all around us, I pray we look out on the world to see those who need God's justice more right now, and as Christians address those needs by our love toward one another, avoiding the temptation to spread justice thin confusing it with fairness. God desires for us to love one another, not to protect our own interests. When lifting up others, I pray we avoid the tendency to focus on ourselves, like those who criticized my father for winning all of those raffles. They claimed only wanted fairness, for anyone else to win, but what they really wanted, was for the odds to be in their favor.

I pray we have eyes to see where we can lean into God's particularity, recognizing that God uses the particular, in order to reach the masses. Let us, as individuals called by God, be agents of God's justice, and go out like the Apostles, preaching the good news, by both our words and our actions, and proclaim the Kingdom revealed right now, and the Kingdom yet to come. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line in all directions



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***

Matthew 9:35-10:8 (NGT) And ***Jesus*** went throughout all the cities and towns, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the Gospel of the ***Kingdom***, and healing every sickness and every ***disease*** among the people. But when He saw the multitude, He had compassion on them, because they were troubled and tossed aside, as ***sheep*** having no shepherd. Then said He to His disciples, "Surely, the harvest is great. But the laborers are few. "Therefore, pray that the Lord of the Harvest would send out laborers into His harvest."

And He ***called*** His ***twelve*** disciples to Him, and gave them ***power*** against unclean ***spirits***, to cast them out, and to ***heal*** every sickness, and every disease. Now the names of the twelve Apostles are these: The first, Simon (called ***Peter***), and ***Andrew*** his brother, James the ***son*** of Zebedee, and ***John*** his ***brother***, ***Philip*** and ***Bartholomew***, ***Thomas***, and ***Matthew*** the ***tax*** collector, James the son of Alphaeus, and ***Lebbaeus*** (whose surname was ***Thaddaeus***), ***Simon*** the ***Canaanite***, and ***Judas Iscariot*** (who also ***betrayed*** Him).

Jesus sent forth these twelve and ***commanded*** them, saying, "Do not go the way of the ***Gentiles***. And do not ***enter*** into the cities of the Samaritans. "But rather, go to the ***lost*** sheep of the House of ***Israel***. "And as you go, ***preach***, saying, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at ***hand!*** "Heal the ***sick***. Cleanse the ***lepers***. ***Raise*** up the dead. ***Cast*** out the demons. ***Freely*** you have ***received***. Freely ***give***.