

May 5, 2024

Pr. Steve

Texts: Acts 10: 34-35; 1 John 4: 20-21; John 15: 9-17

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A great artist was once asked, *'How did you do that? This piece of art, how did you do that?'* and the artist responded, *'How did I do that? I don't even know what I did.'* Kind of like our lives, isn't it? It's all improvisation—or trying to not let everybody else know I've never done this before. Where is this going?

These are fun texts for today, aren't they? *'Now I see—God has no favorites.'* [Acts 10:34] We—who are working so hard to define who our favorites are all the time—can't quite understand this. Oh, *'God has no favorites.'* What are we supposed to do with that? And Jesus says, *'I no longer call you servants. You're friends living in the immediacy, and the intimacy, and the improvisation of life with me. Friends, we're in this together. I'm the vine, you are the branches.'* [John 15: 5] (You know that branches never actually see the vine, right? They just think they're part of the vine.) That's what we're being invited to—into the depths of that kind of life—in fact, the text goes on to say that, even in this world, we too now are living the life of Christ. If you want to know about Christ, talk to Lori, talk to Margit.

It is with us that Christ is living. This is a living organism, and we're part of it. Baffled as we are, confused, separated, all of that stuff—even now—we're living in the life of Christ. This is really difficult for us, because most of the time what we're listening to is the inner critic in our own heads who's saying, *'You're not good enough. You don't qualify. You haven't measured up yet. What is the problem with you? You set your expectation levels, why don't you reach them?'*

And I will never understand fully—I admit I'll go to the grave baffled by *'Why do we pay that such attention?'* But we're all doing it. I think everybody in this congregation has confessed that to me. We're all doing it. And what is it that has that possessive power over us? We're invited today to begin trusting that we are part of the light and life of Christ, and to turn our attention there, and focus, cultivate that relationship, practice the joy, that your joy may be complete. You see, as long as we're paying attention to that negative voice, our joy is incomplete, isn't it? We can't even put joy on the agenda list. That's stretching way too far.

But that's what Christ is giving us now. Even now we are part of the life of Christ. It's an ongoing struggle. Bev said of me many decades ago, *'Steve is the most content person I know. And, he will never be content.'* And that's the paradox, isn't it, in which we all live. There's a great wisdom piece which says, *'If it's not paradoxical, it's not true.'* And that's you and me, isn't it? We're living the paradox—and the invitation.

Can we trust the light and the life as much as those voices which say, *'You're trying so hard, but you still don't count.'* I invite you to just come up here sometime, put your hands on the altar, and say, *'Get this out of my head, God. Get this out of my head!'* Okay? Because it's preventing us from ripening, bearing fruit, living in abundance. That's what Christ wants for us. Now.

So, here's a couple of fun stories, ways in which, I hope, [help us] experience these great texts for today.

Some years ago, Jazz had concluded. I'm heading down here, [pointing to the center aisle] and three people step right in the middle there. They had locked arms—a guy and two women. (Yeah, it's a football team.) And they said, 'We have something to say.' I said, 'Okay.' *'We're atheists, and this was fantastic.'* I said, *'Okay, that's good. Come back.'*

God has no favorites.

Jazz [Church West] is not just entertainment. I hope you know this. It's profound entertainment—but there's other stuff going on. Another time, a guy stepped out—same kind of thing, 'Can I talk to you?' right at the end of Jazz. I said, 'Yeah.' He said 'My sister is having major surgery tomorrow, and we've been very close for a lifetime. I don't know how to deal with this. And so yesterday I went to the gym at 9:00 in the morning. I stayed there till 7:00 at night. Get it out, get it out, get it out! And I woke up this morning, and I had the same feeling, *Damn. I have to go back to the gym.* Then while I was having coffee I was watching TV, and a scroll came across PBS channel 9—*Jazz Church tonight at 5:00.* I've always wanted to do that, so I came. I want you to know—now I'm fine. My sister will be fine. We'll be fine tomorrow at the surgery.'

God has no favorites! We're all friends of God!

I preached at the Unitarian Church in Walnut Creek some years ago. Now, many clergy would attest to this, and I think Pastor Lucy would verify it. *'I'm not sure you should preach at a Unitarian Church.'* That's right. So, things went well, [the] service concluded. There people just sort of scatter afterwards—there's really no recessional. A woman in her early 30s came running down the aisle. She was a bit shorter than me, and she jumped up in my arms, and gave me a huge kiss on the lips! And then she dropped off, and she said, *'Wonderful!'*, and ran off.

So, you know, people are mingling, and eventually a small group gets together, and two of the people in the group said to me, *'You're not a Lutheran!'* 'Yes I am.' *'No, you're not!'* 'What do you mean?' They said, *'Our cousins are Lutherans—you're not a Lutheran!'* Okay. They said, *'Did you meet Elaine?'* I said, 'I don't know who Elaine is.' *'Oh, she's about this tall. Very enthusiastic.'* I said 'Yes, I did meet Elaine.' *'Well, did she say anything?'* 'She said, *'It was wonderful!'* *'Oh good. She's our resident atheist.'*

God has no favorites! We're all friends of God!

In years past we've had, on numerous occasions, indigenous folks from the tribes of the Amazon in Ecuador. And when they've been present, I've sometimes had to say—because they're living in the largest oil spill in the world—it's causing cancer and damage and all sorts of things. And I've shared with the congregation, *'You know, this is kind of awkward for us. Some of us are working in oil industry, and, you know, should we talk about this? It's hard. But if we don't talk about it, our friends will die, and they're already dying. So, I'm going to preach about it'*, which I did.

Well, during one of these weeks, at another occasion, there was a private conversation with one of the leaders of the tribe, and we were talking briefly. (And of course, all of this is through translation from the indigenous language into Spanish into English.) And this leader says to me, *'I heard what you said at the church. You made tears fall in my heart. Truly, we worship the same God.'*

Lots of people would love to fight with that, but I sure don't. So, the truth is, it's the embodiment of the compassion, and the wisdom, and of the grace. Wherever we find Love, we are with God's people, and creating the world in God's—not only image—but in the imagining of God. That's why our response to this light is so, so, important, and also our mutual encouragement of one another.

Charlene's granddaughter was baptized here some years ago, and her daughter, Toby, had been studying at the zendo in Berkeley for some years. She asked if the Roshi, the Abbot, could come for the baptism and participate. And I said, 'Sure,' so we figured it out. And the Abbot, Roshi Mel, came and offered blessings at the baptism, and I had him give a teaching during worship. We continued with the service, had Eucharist, we're approaching the end. And he was sitting up front here, and he just waved his hand at me like this. And I said, 'Yes'. And he said, '*Could I say something?*' I said, 'Sure,' and he stood up. (Now, he's in his full monk's robes, you know, shaved head—this is the real deal—I mean, he's the Roshi.) He turned around to the congregation and he said, '*I should come to church more often. Thank you.*'

What are we in the midst of, friends?

God has no favorites. Even now we are in the work, and joy, and delight of Christ, even now.

About 10 years ago, I was invited to join Rabbi Diane Elliot, and Venerable Tenzin Chogyi, whom some of you will remember. She calls herself 'the giant monk'. Remember Tenzin? I mean, she's up to here—beautiful person. So, we had an Interfaith Retreat, our first one at Vajrapani Institute in the Santa Cruz mountains. People came literally from Alaska, Canada, all the way down the West Coast to San Diego, Mexico, and Argentina. Mind blowing. So, we were waiting downstairs for our Opening Ceremony of the evening, in the beginning of the retreat, as people were upstairs in the Buddha Hall with, you know, Buddha and Manjushri, and Avalokitesvara, and all of the good friends, wishing us multiple blessings and encouragement.

And after [the blessings] were concluded, they were taught a chant, because obviously not everybody was Buddhist.

So, then we were summoned, "You can come upstairs now." So, the three of us went up, and this chanting continued as we walked to our three seats in front of the group. And when it concluded, there was a small period of meditative silence. And then, a spokesperson for Vajrapani simply said to all of us, '*Wisdom is present. Pay attention!*'

And it really moved me. It was far beyond 'Oh, the teachers are here', because we are all teachers of Wisdom. But that announcement— '*Wisdom is here. Pay attention!*'— that's what we need to focus and pay attention.

I think that's what the Prelude is supposed to be on Sunday mornings.

*'Knock it off. Put yourself here. Wisdom is present. We are friends of God.*

*God has no favorites. Even now, we are of the work and love of Christ.'*

Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.