

Favorite Child | *1 John 3:1-7* | 4/15/2018

Do you remember the Smothers Brothers and Tommy's constant complaint to Dicky, "Mom always liked you best"?

I may not have become a father until I was 60, but I can relate to the feelings that prompt so many parents to say - "We don't have a favorite child. We love all our children equally." But, according to a 2016 study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, that claim may well be a fiction. In other words, maybe Tommy was right.

The Wall Street Journal, commenting on the study, quoted Washington, D.C., psychologist Ellen Weber Libby, author of *The Favorite Child*, who agreed that in families, favoritism is as widespread as it is taboo. "Parents need to know that favoritism is normal," Libby said, and it exists in every family. The *Journal* article added that some parents may prefer a child who is more like them and that the favorite can change over time, with a parent preferring a child in a particular stage, such as an infant or a teenager.

While parents having a favorite child may be normal, the article goes on to acknowledge that when preferential treatment is consistently focused on just one child or used to boost a parent's self-esteem, it can become unhealthy, leaving the non-favored child vulnerable to depression and the golden child feeling responsible for the parent's happiness.

Perhaps the most important finding of the study, however, is that when families are close overall, perceptions of favoritism don't have much impact.

This idea of a favorite child may come to mind when reading this sentence in today's second reading: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are" (v. 1). But we might wonder, "Does God prefer some of us over others?"

We do notice in some of the biblical stories God's seeming preference for some of those not the first born: Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, David over all his older brothers. But those choices may have been based on certain abilities the chosen one possessed and God wanted to employ rather than God liking one more than the other.

Likewise, in the Bible, the people of Israel understood themselves as God's chosen people. In Malachi, God says, "I have loved you, ... But you say, 'How have you loved us?' Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says the Lord. Yet I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau; I have made his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals" (Malachi 1:2-3).

"Jacob" and "Esau" do not refer to the individuals who had those names, but to the nations of Israel and Edom that had descended from those distant ancestors. In response to accusations from the people of Israel that God has not loved them, the Lord points to the then-current devastation of Edom. It may seem that God is okay with the Israelites understanding themselves as favored children.

But against that we have biblical assertions that indicate that God wants *everyone* to be in the divine family. There are many, but do we really need more than "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world, through him, might be saved" (John 3:16-17). Not just his favorites! The World!

Nonetheless, some of us may feel we *are* -- or *are not* -- among the favored. If things have gone pretty well for us, then we may conceive of ourselves as being among God's favorites. If we've suffered a lot of losses and had to struggle with life, we may feel that we *aren't* among his favorites.

But there's a problem with this view. Remembering that the Israelites were God's chosen people, how do we explain all the persecution and massacres the Jews have endured over the centuries? The good and bad we experience don't seem to be good measures of God's love for us.

It might be argued that those who preach the so-called "prosperity gospel" and have financially profited mightily by doing so see themselves as God's favorite children. But that's why I have some serious problems with that "gospel". It has very little biblical support.

On the other hand, we may know people who lived much of their lives far from God, who later repented and became grateful disciples, and who have said things like, "Why God would want me back is a mystery to me. I've wasted a lot of my life, but whatever I've got left is devoted to God." They are perhaps saying that they don't see themselves as among God's favorites, but they are glad to be on God's family roster at all, even in a humble position.

That may have been how the prodigal son felt when he finally headed for home, asking only to be made a servant in the household. Ironically, the welcome he received from his father led his older brother to conclude that the prodigal was, in fact, the favorite child. The father's response to the older son seems to be his way of saying he loved both of his children.

But we should be careful not to reduce this to, "God loves everyone no matter what we do," because that's not the whole story. The second half of our second reading today describes how those who are loved by God should act. "No one who abides in him (Jesus) sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him." (v.6)

Wow! And you thought trying to please your Mom and Dad was tough! This almost sounds like we are not brothers and sisters of Jesus if we ever sin! But that is not the case.

God does have a favorite child, and his name is Jesus. But the good news is, we have God's promise that, because of what Jesus has done for us, when he looks at us, he sees Jesus, his favorite! That may be what John was getting at when he wrote, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he (Jesus) is revealed, we will be like him ..." (v.2)

So, in the end, our call is not to discern who are God's favorites and who are not, but rather to consider what family responsibilities we have as his children. Yes, God loves us, but we reject that love if we ignore the righteous living to which God urges us.

It is true that we cannot drift beyond God's love. But it is also true that our response to that love *should be* to give God obedience and live righteously. This was probably what John was getting at in our passage for today, when he said, "And all who have this hope in [God] purify themselves, just as he (Jesus) is pure" (v. 3).

So, rather than taking God's love for granted, let us act like beloved children by living as much like Jesus as we can, and giving thanks for what Jesus, the favorite, has done for us.

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