

April 15, 2018  
Genesis: 4:1-16  
God's Favorites  
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Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.' Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.'

Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.' Then the Lord said to him, 'Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.' And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer, Amen.*

Ever since I was a child, I have been an avid Star Trek Fan. The Creator of Star Trek, Gene Roddenberry's positive view of the evolution of humanity captured my imagination. The show was not just about advanced technology but a kind of advanced all-inclusive humanity. Captain Kirk was my role model – passionate but wise, realistic but eternally hopeful, a decisive leader but a loyal friend and colleague to his officers. I actually have a favorite Captain Kirk quote: In one episode pleading with a superior race of people who clearly believed that humans were nothing but barbarians, Kirk finally admits: "We're human beings, with the blood of a million savage years on our hands. But we can stop it. We can admit that we're killers, but we won't kill today."

If only James Kirk had been Abel's brother instead of Cain – right? Because, in almost every episode of that original 60's show, Kirk was tempted by every sin known to humanity -pleasure, power, fame, revenge, immortality... But he always chose the higher way: humble non-interference with indigenous populations and sacrificial love for his crew and his ship. It is clear then that Kirk was Star Fleet's favorite son.

In the Genesis story, it is Abel who has always been the presumed favored son of God. Yet he was not tempted at all. God looked with favor upon *his* offering. Abel never knew hardship. In fact, Abel was not presented with any challenge at all. It is easy to refrain from sin if you are neither made aware of it nor are tempted by it. Not so with Captain Kirk and of course, not so with Cain. And in the biblical account it is God who is the enlightener. God not only reveals to Cain what sin is. God does it by tempting Cain with a murderous envy.

This raises a number of difficult questions about this text, about God and about human nature. But the one I want to hone in on today is, “What does it really mean to be favored by God? What does it mean to be a favored child? Is there really such a thing when it comes to a loving God? How about a loving parent?”

Think about it for a minute: If you have children, to which one are you more likely to give encouragement and praise and special attention?

Let’s say you have one child who is easily discouraged and extremely sensitive – a child who, for whatever reason seems quickly to get down on him or herself. Then you have another child for whom the good, the bad, and the ugly just seems to roll right off of his or her back like water off a duck; for whatever reason, this child just seems to always land on his or her feet.

Now, which one gets the most attention?

The one who seems to need it more - right? So who is the favorite – the one from whom you expect more – or the one from whom you expect less? I would argue that it is the one from whom you expect more – the one who is clearly more capable of taking on the larger challenges of life.

If this is true, is it not possible that Cain might actually have been more like Captain Kirk after all? In other words, maybe God had regard for Abel’s offering rather than Cain’s because God high hopes for Cain. The text certainly would bear that out. After God’s high praise of Abel’s offering and the lack thereof where Cain is concerned, God says to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you yatab (yatab –that is the Hebrew word here - yatab) If you yatab, will you not be accepted? And if you do not (yatab), sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

Yatab is a Hebrew word meaning primarily to “be well” or “to be pleasing to”. Its secondary meaning is “to do well.” Yet for some reason, it is almost always translated here in its secondary form which, I believe, reflects a decidedly human bias on one’s worth being associated with what one *does*, more than with *who* one is.

And it changes the passage considerably if we use the primary definition. Rather than God saying here, “If you *do well*, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door,” which assumes that Cain has done something fundamentally wrong – what if God is actually saying “If you are well or pleasing unto yourself (because that is the way I created you) are you not already accepted? And if you are not well or pleasing unto yourself (remembering how I created you), sin is lurking at the door.”

Read this way, God actually favors Cain because it is clear to God that Cain is the stronger of the two brothers. Cain therefore is given a real opportunity here for understanding himself, God, his brother, and the inter-relationship among them all in a way that could lead humanity in a whole new direction.

God is not chiding Cain for having done something wrong. God is really inviting Cain to feel his rage but refuse to act upon it. He is being invited, in fact, to make the confession of Captain Kirk – that he is a killer but he won't kill today. Cain does not need to do anything to earn some feeling of having achieved God's blessing. It has already been determined that he *is* well. He is good. This becomes apparent after Cain gives in to his rage and kills his brother. God has compassion for the goodness still in Cain, putting a protective mark on him.

When Cain reacts to God's praise of Abel's offering, God tells Cain that by his very nature and connection to God he *is* already well. It thus mirrors the parable Jesus tells of the prodigal son. When the wayward son returns and the father (who in the story is a stand-in for God) throws a party, the older brother refuses to participate and do you remember what the father tells the older brother? He says "All I have belongs to you." In other words, my love for you is complete and unwavering. It is unaffected by my love for your brother.

So - what if being God's favorite means that life is not made easier but harder because God recognizes that the favored one is capable of so much more?

That would certainly fit with the lives of all those other favored children of scripture: Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Esther, Saul, David, all of the prophets, the disciples, Stephen, the Apostle Paul – every one of these folks is considered a favorite of God and every one suffers in ways others are usually spared – I am talking about gut wrenching, existential, emotional and spiritual, along with, physical suffering. And, of course there is the ultimate favorite of God's: Jesus; and we all know what happened to him.

So, if we suffer from existential, emotional and spiritual angst, maybe it isn't because God has cursed us. In fact, maybe it is the exact opposite; maybe we suffer precisely because God favors us. Maybe we suffer because as with Cain, God is at the bottom of our suffering and has high hopes for us. Perhaps we are suffering because God has more faith in us than we have in ourselves. Maybe we suffer because we are being given an opportunity to leave self behind in ways we did not imagine possible. Maybe we suffer because God knows we are capable of bearing the suffering that naturally comes with the ability to love sacrificially in a world of narcissistic callousness.

If so, maybe there is an opportunity that is being missed. What opportunity are you missing because you are focused on the blessings of your brother while you suffer?

Fred Craddock tells the following parable of missed opportunity.

He says, "I remember sitting in a little rural church on a Sunday night. I was feeling forlorn and disconnected from God, my family from life in general. Nothing seemed to be going my way and I was tired. I wanted so much to connect with God if such a thing really existed – although it

seemed that if God did exist, he was out to get me. But there I was anyway, reaching out as best as I knew how.

It was a summer meeting, there was no air conditioning and it was hot; so a window was open beside my pew. The minister was preaching on his favorite text, “Be not the first by whom the new is tried, because a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and it’s better to be safe than sorry, because fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

I was listening to him drone away when a man came by the church building and stopped by the window and said, “Psst, psst.”

I said, “What is it? I’m listening to the sermon.”

He said, “Come with me.”

I said, “Where are you going?”

He said, “I know where there is a pearl of great price that’s more valuable than all the other pearls in the world.”

I said, “There’s no such thing.”

He said, “In fact, where I’m going, there is treasure buried in a field.” I said, “You’re joking!”

He said, “Where I’m going, bums are invited to sit down at a king’s table.”

I said, “That’s ridiculous.”

He said, “In fact, they give great big parties for rude wayward children who come home.”

I said, “That’s stupid.”

Well, I listened to the rest of the sermon and after it was over, I told the preacher about how I was disturbed and that I hoped it didn’t upset him during the sermon.

He said, “Who was that?”

I said, “I don’t know. Somebody telling me all this fancy stuff.”

The preacher said, “Well, was he getting anybody?”

And I said, “Well, none of our crowd went, but I noticed he had about 12 with him.” Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 36.

What opportunity are you missing because you are so focused on having been overlooked, discarded, or and on getting your suffering relieved, that you can’t see the call to new life that might be right there at the center of all of it?

Being God's favored; it does not mean that we get what we think we want. In fact, spending all of our energy on getting what we think we want may just land us in a surprising kind of hell.

There was a couple that loved nothing better in life than a good game of golf. In their working years they played the game every chance they got, and when they finally retired they looked forward to many happy hours banging that little white ball all over the country.

Yet, just as this couple was on the verge of realizing their lifelong dream, tragedy struck. The two of them were in a terrible car accident on the way to their favorite course. They died instantly.

There was no pain. They had the sensation of traveling together through a long tunnel of light, and when they emerged they found themselves - where else? - on a golf course. And, what a course it was! More beautiful than any golf course in the land of the living.

The man looked off to his side, and there he saw a gleaming white golf cart, with two sets of clubs in the back. He picked out a driver from the bag labeled "His," set a ball upon the tee, and swung for all he was worth. A hole in one! The man was ecstatic, for never had he come close to such an experience on Earth.

Then his wife stepped up to the tee. Bang! A hole in one. And that's the way it went for both of them, as they progressed from hole to hole. When they reached the end of the course, their scores were tied: 18 apiece.

These two couldn't believe their good fortune. They smiled at one another as if to say, "Isn't this wonderful?"

Just then they glanced at the sand trap next to the eighteenth hole, and there they saw an old man slowly raking the sand: the groundskeeper, no doubt.

The husband caught the man's eye and called out with a grin, "I never dreamed heaven could be so beautiful!"

But the bedraggled old groundskeeper shook his head and replied: "I hate to disappoint you folks, but this is not heaven."

Being favored by God is not getting everything you ever wanted. That, in fact would be hell. Being favored means being surprised by what happens to us just when we think all is lost.

Being the favorite is discovering courage, love, belonging, joy, understanding, forgiveness, success at something difficult. And that does not come without the experience of terror, lovelessness, being an outsider, being misunderstood or not understood at all, having done something that requires forgiveness, and having failed miserably.

Before his death, Fred Rogers told the story of being invited to the White House to address a summit meeting on children and television. This particular presentation appeared to him to have

fallen on deaf ears and he walked away feeling rather blue, thinking himself a failure. After the conference was over and he was walking out of the ornate meeting room, he passed a burly military guard standing immobile in full-dress uniform. As he did, he heard the guard whisper, "Thanks, Mr. Rogers."

He stopped and asked the guard, "Thanks for what?"

Mr. Rogers himself tells the story from here:

*"Well, sir," he said, "as I listened to you today, I started to remember my grandfather's brother. I haven't thought about him in years. I was only seven when he died, and I always felt kind of cheated by his death and even bitter; but I remembered today that just before he died he gave me his favorite fishing rod. I've just been thinking, maybe that's why I like fishing so much and why I like to show the kids in my neighborhood all about it. So thank you for helping me to see the gift in my great uncle that keeps on giving."*

*Well, (said Rogers after telling the story), as far as I'm concerned, the major reason for my going to Washington that day was that military guard and nourishing the memory of his great uncle. What marvelous mysteries we're privileged to be part of! Why would that young man be assigned to guard that particular room on that particular day? It's slender threads like that weave this complex fabric of our life together.* Fred Rogers, commencement address at Marquette University, May 20, 2001. [marquette.edu/commencement/2001/address.html](http://marquette.edu/commencement/2001/address.html). Retrieved April 14, 2015.

Indeed. Let us pray. Gracious God, help us to search until we find you at the bottom of our existential suffering so that we can claim our favored status. And now bless these gifts that they may indeed proclaim the goods news of relief to a suffering world. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.