

Does God Have Favorites? WEEK ONE

It might surprise you to hear that I got teased as a kid - but always playfully.

My siblings used to tease me by saying
that I was my parents' favorite child.

(I actually think I was!)

In school, my classmates would accuse me of being the teacher's pet.

(Also kinda true).

Then I became a priest and found that some people
put me on a pedestal thinking that I have a direct line to God.

And while it can be nice to think that I am favored or special,
I have to keep in check, otherwise I'll end up with a swelled head.

So, how about you?

Anyone treat you like you were special or favored -
in your family, at school or work?

SCREEN: Does God Have Favorites main screen

Well today we're beginning a new message series that asks the question,
Does God Have Favorites?

The scriptures we hear at Mass sure seem to say that God does.

For example, there's today's first reading.

We heard how God helped the Israelites win a battle against their enemies.

And you might say, *'Well that was written thousands of years ago,
God's not really like that.'*

But this is a question people are still wrestling with today.

It's so timely with everything going on
in our nation, our world, and our Church.

So over the next five weeks we'll be turning to scripture and our faith for answers.

Make no mistake, this is going to be a very challenging series

as we're forced to confront our preconceived ideas

about who God is and whom God favors.

To start our series off, we're going to ask the question,

Does God love people who pray more than those who don't?

Does God love people who pray more than those who don't?

You might think you already know the answer,
but be open to a new perspective which I'll offer you.
Let's dive into the readings.

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The Book of Exodus describes how God sent Moses
to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land.
Moses taught them that they're the Chosen People -
they enjoyed 'favored nation' status in God's eyes.
Their journey to freedom was a difficult one
but God helped them along the way.
Today we heard about their encounter with a hostile tribe.
Our first reading described the battle.
Moses stood on the top of a hill as Joshua and his men led the fight.
Here's how it went:

**SCREEN: As long as Moses kept his hands raised up,
Israel had the better of the fight,
but when he let his hands rest,
Amalek had the better of the fight.**

The fighting lasted from sunrise to sunset,
which is an impossible length of time for anyone to keep their hands raised.
I could probably last ten minutes.
To keep Moses's hands raised in prayer to God,
his brother Aaron supported one arm
while a man named Hur held the other one.
And Israel ruled the day.

Now, I think there are a couple important lessons here for us.
The first one is about the importance of praying to God in times of crisis.
But a second lesson is that prayer alone might not always be enough.
We all need other people to support us whenever we struggle, question or doubt.
Other people who can lift us up, encourage and sustain us when times get tough.

Just like Moses discovered, it's impossible for us to journey through life alone.

If we try, we'll fail.

But with others by our side, we can make it through.

SCREEN: Fr. Mike ordination pic

Recognize this handsome devil?

Yes, that's me with my parents on the day

I was ordained a priest in 1985.

Haven't changed a bit, have I?

This weekend I'm celebrating my 40th anniversary

and I hope you'll join me after Mass in Cafe Pius for some refreshments.

I recently showed this picture to a close friend who asked me,

"do you remember what you were feeling at that moment?"

And I do.

I remember two conflicting emotions:

unimaginable joy and sheer terror.

Yes, you heard me right - *joy and terror*.

Why terror?

Because I still wasn't sure why God called me to be a priest.

Growing up I was shy - still am - and I was terrified of public speaking.

As a kid, I wasn't an altar server, didn't attend Catholic school

and didn't know any priests.

During my 8 years of seminary I met so many guys who were

more outgoing, smarter, and holier than me.

So one question I wrestled with back then was,

"Why did God choose me?"

I can't say I ever got a clear answer.

I can say that what keeps me going are two things:

Prayer and people.

I turn to God in prayer everyday and I turn to others for support.

Without these two things,

I wouldn't be standing here today.

SCREEN: people

In my life, I have been blessed with many individuals who have stood by my side for more than 40 years - my family, friends, and parishioners.

They lift me up any time I start to falter.

I hope you have people like that in your life.

If not, seek them out.

Don't be a Lone Ranger.

Don't try to go it alone.

God made you for relationship.

It's how we're hard wired.

Reach out whenever you struggle.

Turn to family, friends or parishioners for support.

Allow others to carry you when you're unable to go it alone.

I do, and it's made all the difference.

SCREEN: prayer

And then there is prayer, which is the second thing that has enabled me to reach the milestone of 40 years.

The parable in today's gospel told us about the necessity to pray always without becoming weary.

And the example given was a widow who kept asking the judge in her town to decide a case in her favor.

She was so persistent that eventually he gave her what she wanted.

Jesus said that in the same way, God will quickly hear the prayers of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night.

Seems like a pretty clear message about prayer which is to:

SCREEN: be persistent

Is it really that simple?

Just keep asking God for whatever you need and eventually you'll get it?

I don't know about you, but that's not been my experience of prayer.

All those years in seminary when I struggled

with feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy,
I prayed constantly asking God to take them away and
to make me like the other seminarians.
And when my prayers weren't answered,
I felt like God didn't care about me.
I also thought that maybe I wasn't asking in the right way.
I also concluded that God must have favorites and I wasn't one of them.
Maybe you've had similar thoughts when your prayers weren't answered.
After my first year of seminary I decided to leave.
Decided I'd been wrong to think I had a vocation to the priesthood.
I packed up all my stuff, said goodbye to my classmates, and was headed out the door.
The priest who'd been my spiritual director asked to see me.
He told me something that's stuck with me all these years.
He said, *"I think you're going about this the wrong way.
You're telling God what you want. Your prayer should be, thy will be done."*

SCREEN: thy will be done

Thy will be done.
He encouraged me to spend the summer
praying and reflecting on those words.
I did as he asked.
I made it my prayer for three months.
And I decided to return to the seminary that Fall
and as they say, the rest is history.
My point is, be persistent when you pray.
But pray these words consistently, *thy will be done.*
Not my will Lord, but yours.
You created me, you know me through and through.
You know me better than I know myself.
You know what I need and when I need it.
So not my will, but thy will be done.
To return to the question of today's message,

do I think that God loved me more than others

because I prayed those prayers of desperation in the seminary?

I don't think so.

That would imply that I could somehow control God or make God do my bidding.

What I've learned is that God loves everyone - loves each of us.

His love is a free gift - undeserved, unearned, unmerited.

This also means that there's nothing we can do to make God love us more.

So praying longer or louder than others

won't change how much God loves you or me.

And there's nothing you or I can do to make God stop loving us.

Does God want us to pray?

Absolutely!

And that's because God wants to have a relationship with us -

wants to be our best friend.

So if you want your friendship to grow, pray regularly.

Because the best way to explain prayer is that it is simply conversation with God.

Think of the people in your life that you are closest to.

Aren't they the ones you talk to and spend time with?

The same is true when it comes to God.

If you want God to be your best friend - and that's what God wants -

you have to make time for prayer.

So pray daily and persistently, never stop praying.

And obviously there are many ways to pray.

Formal prayers, spontaneous prayers, praying with scripture,

meditative prayer, praying while out in nature.

Pray however you feel most comfortable, but pray.

But don't become proud because you pray and others don't.

Don't become judgmental towards family members who don't pray or worship.

Pride and judgmentalness are enemies of true faith.

Prayer is not about forcing God to do what you want,

it's about surrendering your life and your will to God.

It's not about you taking control of God but allowing God to take control of you.

SCREEN: Does God Have Favorites main screen

I have been so blessed to have God at my side
these past 40 years.

Through prayer and other people I've grown in ways
I could never have imagined.

May hope is that you will discover this too,
and like me you will make God your favorite. Amen. +