



# Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers  
From the clergy and members  
of Holy Trinity Church  
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: Keeping it in the Family

Comment: It is inevitable that members of a church ask the clergy for special, spiritual favors. Despite what they may know about their priest's personal life or even the importance of the laity to pray for each other, something remains in people's minds that the priest is a shaman, a magic medicine man, with a direct linkage to the Divine. This can involve as serious a matter as a gravely sick child or a crisis of faith. It can also be trivial. When asked to do something about the weather, for example, I usually use the line, "I'm in *sales*, not management."

Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

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It is a similar scene that today's Gospel reading presents to us. The people of Nazareth have listened politely to the Lord's somewhat unusual sermon about his being the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel. Now they want the floorshow: special favors from the "local boy who made good." His response is exasperation, expressed by quoting two old sayings and turning them on his old neighbors; first: "Heal thyself," and "No prophet is accepted in his own country." This is an experience shared by anyone who has ever dared to "come home" and share the gospel, of any other new experience for that matter, with those who think they know you. For every successful "favorite son" returning to general admiration, there are many more bitter disappointments as the presumptions of long ago are corrected in light of how the child has become and adult. For Nazareth, this meant the lesson that Jesus wasn't just "their" wonderworker, but the Savior of the world.

The Nazareth community expected special favors, and often we do too. Faithful members of our congregation who are regular worshipers, loyal to the parish, and

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(perhaps especially) generous contributors, often expect a special deal. It is as if God truly does play favorites, contrary to what St. Peter said in his first sermon on Pentecost.

This attitude does even have to involve special prayers or influence; it can also affect our ideas about God's purpose for the world. Jeremiah's calling to be a prophet is described in today's Old Testament reading as being not only from before his birth but, equally surprising for the Chosen People to hear, "to the nations" as well. As the Old Testament weaves its story of the spiritual growth of Israel, the understanding of Israel's God seems to grow in strength and power to become not only the personal protector of the tribe, but also a universal God truly worthy of the name.

Our Lord's words to his oldest neighbors may bring us today a certain righteous satisfaction that Jesus "told them off" for their demands for special treatment. However, Luke's story was written not for the *Jews* to read, but for the first generation of *Christians* who were still dealing with an equally painful issue concerning non-Jewish converts to the new faith. Their feeling seem to have been that they, as faithful followers of the First Covenant, were first class travelers compared to the Gentile newcomers who were expected to be satisfied traveling coach. Jesus' examples were meant to hit his listeners right between the eyes, but Luke's editing of the story packed a punch for the early Christians, too.

What does God say to *us* in today's readings? Are there those whom we would like to consider "also ran's" in the race of the Christian life? Are they members of another church across town or across the street? Are they poorer than we are, or maybe richer? Is our sense of our personal salvation so sure that we can look down in scorn on others who don't seem to come up to our standards or belong to our special group: our tribe, our race, our nationality or our denomination? Paul's letter to the Corinthians speaks about those who claim that the Pentecostal gift of speaking in tongues makes them "exceptional Christians," a danger that some churches face even today where dramatic manifestations of the Spirit are required for full membership. The temptation for all of us is that we may *think* that we are willing to share the gift of salvation, but only in *restricted doses*, and only with our friends and neighbors: the "best people" who will "feel comfortable" in "our church" or "our group" whose members deserve special treatment. There may be more of Nazareth in Manila that we might wish to believe.

The antidote to such thinking is love: the “perfect love” that Paul writes about which can “cast out fear.” In the case of today’s theme, that fear might be that someone gets more than we do, or gets it first. (This is the ‘Manila driver’s’ approach to the Gospel: don’t let anyone get in ahead of you!). All such greed, even for “spiritual things,” counteracts the liberating nature of the Good News of God in Christ.

Today’s Scripture readings conspire to make us feel “comfortable” before sneaking in the one-two punch of a powerful message. It is a message of open welcome to the whole world that needs to hear the message of Christ every bit as much as our family and friends do. It is a message that tells us that the Church must become the biggest of all families, incorporating men and women from all backgrounds into a new and transcendent identity as Christ’s brothers and sisters.

Does God play favorites? Perhaps so: He loves His Son Jesus the best, because through Him the whole world is called to become His children.