

Sermon: God shows no partiality

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, April 20, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I was fascinated, this past week, to hear on the radio, that Vera Etches, the president and CEO of CHEO, that is the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, one of Canada's top paediatric research hospitals, is recommending its staff to avoid U.S. trips. "Due to the escalation of issues and volatility in the U.S., CHEO strongly encourages individuals to refrain from travel to that country at this time."

My fascination stems from my own curiosity, which questions: when have I ever seen a hospital issuing a travel advisory before? Which as I recall, is never. Never have I, in the past 40 years living in Canada, ever seen a hospital issue a travel advisory to its own staff. More importantly, what expertise does CHEO offer on the issue of cross-border travel?

So I did a bit of digging, and looked into the rationale behind CHEO's warning against travel to the U.S., and to the best of my understanding, the organization is worried that patients' privacy might be compromised when a U.S. border guard asks a hospital staff to unlock their phone or electronic device. No specific instance was cited, nor words on why a hospital staff would be carrying with them sensitive patient data across the border in the first place. The Canadian government has recently expanded its advisory to warn travellers they should "expect scrutiny" at the U.S. border—including potential searches of mobile phone and other electronic devices.

Look, I understand the political climate of this time. I watch the news just like everyone else, on the heightened sense of unease people have faced when coming across an elevated level of scrutiny exercised by the U.S. border officials. I for one has no plan to travel to that country in the near future, and have joked privately that one might need to bring a burner phone to cross the U.S. border at this time.

Nevertheless, that travel advisory from CHEO bothers me, and the hospital is not alone. Similar advisories have been issued, more like piling on, from other Canadian organizations during the past week, including Alberta Investment Management Corp, the Canadian Association of University Teachers, and the University of Waterloo. Carleton University's

approach seems to be a bit more sensible, simply offering general guidance to help staff and student protect their research data while travelling internationally.

Pulling back to look at the bigger picture of this nascent Canadian patriotism, this 'elbow up' attitude we seem to be basking in, this rally around the flag, this us vs. them mentality. My concern is where is all going? Will our partiality to our own interests trigger a new round of negative reactions from our neighbours to the south, when they inevitably seek to be partial to their own interests? Will one man's crazed idea on international trade, albeit from the most powerful man in the world, destabilize and eventually destroy a deep, stable, and close friendship that have lasted for the better part of the past century? Or will cooler and saner heads prevail at the end?

Sisters and brothers in Christ, as we come to this Easter Sunday, as we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord, Saviour and friend, we are reminded by the words of the Apostle Peter, that "God shows no partiality".

God shows no partiality! Peter uttered these words in a post resurrection context of Acts 10, where he was welcomed into Cornelius' household. You see, the partiality of God for Israel was a long held doctrine, deeply ingrained in Judaism. In the first century geopolitics, Jews and Gentiles, like water and oil, simply did not mix.

Cornelius was a Gentile; he was a centurion of the Italian Cohort. Yet, he was a man who feared God; he prayed constantly to God, and gave alms generously to the people, him and his entire household. So in a vision, an angel of God urged him to send for a certain man in the region of Joppa, name Simon (that is Peter's former name).

At the same time, the angel of the Lord also gave vision to Peter, three exactly same visions of the heavens opening up, and out came all kinds of creatures not fit for consumption according to the Jewish dietary law. So when Peter heard a voice, commanding him to get up, kill and eat, his natural reaction was 'by no means', for he has never eaten anything that is considered profane or unclean, once again according to the same dietary law. Three times he was given the same vision, three times it ended with the voice telling him, as in verse 15, "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*" In an indirect way, God was prepping Peter for the encounter with Cornelius and his household. When they eventually met later in the chapter, and when each side had told the other of God's vision to them respectively, Peter came to this new realization in verse 34-35, "I

truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to God.”

God shows no partiality, that Gentiles and Jews alike could find salvation through Jesus Christ, and in so doing finding themselves a place in the inclusive kingdom of God. That may not sound like too big a leap to us in the 21st century, but to Peter and the early Church, it was a profoundly new thing. One could even say that Peter the great evangelist was himself evangelized through this encounter with Cornelius.

Peter still had to preach and teach about Jesus to Cornelius, as recorded in our reading today. Peter still had to baptize Cornelius and his household a bit later in the same chapter. But the realization of the impartiality of God, was the catalyst that set the stage for mission to the Gentiles which the Apostle Paul would embark on later, and that mission would forever change the face of Christianity, living in the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This news of God’s impartiality is not just an abstract characteristic of God, it places a clear demand on us, as the Easter people, to love impartially as God loves. Peter enacts God’s impartial love by eating with Cornelius, by working out reconciliation with Gentiles, as he actively seeks peace with them. It is no coincidence that Peter saw, as in verse 36, the message preached by Jesus as the message or the good news of peace.

The theme of peace is the soft tissue that connects the New Testament, that forms the body of Christ. Jesus himself promised peace in his farewell discourse of John 14:27, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” Apostle Paul preached ‘the gospel of peace’—a term he used in multiple occasions in the Epistle to Romans and to Ephesians.

The peace that Jesus, Peter and Paul speak about is an active peace between God and people, made possible by the cross. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, what was once unimaginable or absurd is now entirely possible—peace in heaven, between God and people, peace on earth, between people and people.

Consequently we the Church, the community of faith that professes faith in Jesus Christ, are now tasked to become a community of peace-seekers, of peace-makers, a community of radical reconcilers between Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, even Canadian and American, for God shows no partiality.

In light of this, perhaps, we should be going out of our way to travel to the United States, and actively show our neighbours in the south. And should we be flagged by U.S. border officials for secondary inspection, we tell them that that in spite of their current president, and in the name of the resurrected Christ, we still love you. I wonder, would that make it to the evening news?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**