

Text: James 2: 1-17
Title: Mercy Trumps Judgement
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My children mock me mercilessly.

They believe that whenever I'm with black folks my inflection changes ~ I talk differently. So, for example, we'll go to Roseland Christian Ministries for something, I'll talk, and they'll make fun of me all the way home. I try to defend myself. You don't want to be the nerdy-white-suburban-guy who acts like he's hip, black and urban. My kids remain unconvinced....

I do know that while in Texas I pick up a little drawl and I use phrases that don't normally cross my lips.

I'd argue that most of us respond, change, and adapt to the people that we encounter. We act differently toward different people based on all sorts of social markers. At our worst we're chameleons; at our best we're trying to connect. But, we all, to one degree or another, modulate how we respond to people....

Quite frankly Sandi (my wife) and Kent Van Zanten (Rev. Tony's son) stand out as two who treat people the same no matter race, class, role, status, etc. It's a remarkable gift.

This morning's text is often read as a warning against showing preference for the rich and powerful over the poor and marginalized. We interpret it as a guiding reminder for how we're seated in the sanctuary or to whom we pay attention in Fellowship Hall. At stake is some principle of equality. Here in God's house we don't judge based on appearance. We don't show favoritism based on beauty, or skin color, or fashion, or symbols of wealth. All are welcome and respected. As Peter puts it in the Acts of the Apostles, "God is no respecter of persons." (Acts 10:34 KJV)

However, modern biblical scholarship suggests that our text is not about a worship setting but a judicial one. James is writing when there was a complex knotty relationship between the Roman Empire, Jewish culture, and an emerging Christianity. This text is probably referring to a hybrid religious/legal procedure in which conflicts would be resolved. And, in that setting judicial partiality was being shown to the wealthy.

But, isn't that just the way things are?

When I was in college we had to read books, we didn't have the internets and the googly machine. I don't remember many titles, but for some reason I can't forget, *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*. That book dramatically highlighted multiple factors that tilt the scales of justice toward the well-heeled. It opened my eyes to a rigged system. A powerful and contemporary take on that same theme is *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. (Not an easy read, but I commend it to your reading.)

The point being: Injustice and inequality are the way of the world.

However, James is writing that as followers of Jesus Christ we would seek after a different kingdom. This is about more than who gets the choice pew or who's acknowledged because they gave a sizable gift to the Capital Campaign. This is about the poor getting a fair shake.

James makes a case for why this is a concern of God's heart. His argument has three points:

1. God chose those who were poor in this world to be rich in faith.
2. The rich are the ones who are persecuting you and the church ~ so why would you defer to them.
3. To show favoritism violates the law of the kingdom: Love God and love neighbor.

Now, as you can imagine, there is a big stink over the claim that God shows partiality toward the poor.

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

You smell the problem.

Clearly, he means the poor in spirit ~ not the physically poor. Clearly, to side with the poor is to trade one expression of favoritism for another. And that's not right. Clearly, James means something else, or he must be wrong, or... Clearly, poverty is no sign of virtue. In our age poverty is linked to gun violence and welfare abuse and drugs and... And, God wouldn't choose that! Clearly, poverty is relative. I am poor to some and rich to others. So, how can God choose? What defines poverty?

Dear friends, I get the stink about this text, but for this preacher it's hard to imagine that it's not about the physically poor. It comes hot on the heels of James' definition that pure and faultless religion is to look after the widow and the orphan and to keep one's self unstained from the world. There doesn't seem to be any metaphoric nuance. There's little wiggle room.

I don't have any easy way out of this sticky wicket.

James doesn't say that God has chosen only the poor.

James doesn't say that the rich are excluded.

But, as Douglas Moo puts it:

God delights especially to shower his grace on those whom the world has discarded and on those who are most keenly aware of their own special inadequacy.

May we have the same heart and embody the same ethic.

May we be no "respector of persons" and yet find our place with the marginalized.

Maybe Will Campbell found that balance.

Born in the poor rural south, Will Campbell was ordained at 17 in his local Baptist church. After World War II he studied at Tulane, Wake Forest, and Yale, and had a colorful career agitating for civil rights. For example, in 1957 he was one of four people who escorted the nine black students as they integrated Little Rock Central High School; and he was the only white person to attend the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Campbell writes that the hate mail from the white right poured in.

As he grew older, Campbell was uneasy that he hated the redneck bigots who hated him. He discovered it was easy to play favorites. It was easy to think that God was always on your side. Campbell came to realize that he had become little more than a "social activist," which was different than being a follower of Jesus.

In his words, "I came to understand the nature of tragedy. And one who understands the nature of tragedy can never take sides." Since God doesn't play favorites, Campbell concluded, neither should he.

So, Will Campbell started sipping whiskey with the Ku Klux Klan. He did their funerals and their weddings, and he befriended the Grand Dragon of North Carolina. When they were sick he emptied their bed pans. And then the hate mail came from the liberal left.

Dear friends, maybe the heart and ethic of God is somehow captured in siding with whoever is poor, whoever is marginalized, whoever is oppressed: economically oppressed, culturally oppressed, spiritually oppressed...

And maybe the twist is love.

After building his case James writes that faith bereft of deeds is dead. Again, he ties it to practical, tangible expressions of mercy and justice. This is not the language of spirituality and well-intentioned feelings. This is physical.

Suppose a brother or a sister is naked....

The word here is *gymnos*, from which we get gymnasium because of the Greek practice of men competing naked in sporting events.

But, James probably doesn't mean literally naked, rather clothed with only a thin undergarment. If you see a brother or a sister without that which is adequate....

Without food,
without clothing,
without shelter,
without education,
without healthcare,
without love....

If one of you says to them, "Go in peace: keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if not accompanied with actions, is dead.

And you know the big stink here. We're supposed to be saved by faith alone and not by works. Works without faith is dead in the water. All you need is a little faith. But, James is not really contrasting faith and works, as if those were two alternative options in one's approach to God. He is not pitting one against the other.

So, what if we changed the words?
What if we toyed with the text?
What if we read it a little differently?

I think it's helpful to think not of works or deeds but to think of love. Works or deeds has a sort of "to do" quality. It's like a list of things to accomplish. It feels like a requirement. And, as we meet requirements we think it's our doing. But, what if we replace works or deeds with love?

Faith without love is dead.
Likewise, works without love is dead.
Therefore, wherever there is faith ~ love will be expressed.

I am constantly wrestling with how to live in a complex-multi-cultural-post-Christian-divisive-secular-world that is marked by inequality. Without deference or dismay due to social markers I want to love my neighbor. And I don't want to get bogged down in any extra-curricular debate over what comes first, faith or works? Or, what matters more, faith or works? So....

So, no matter who you are, no matter the nature of your faith or the quality of your works, may we be reminded that in God's economy mercy trumps judgment. And therefore, while being no respecter of persons, let us love God and neighbor. For, wherever there is faith ~ love will be expressed.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.