

Proverbs 22: 1–2, 8–9, 22–23

James 2:1-17

This has been a tough week for a world that keeps falling, knocked down by water washing away homes and fires that turn life’s dreams to ashes; knocked around by chaotic laws to keep people from choosing leaders and from choosing personal decisions for their bodies; knocked out by ICU beds filled with children; knocked flat by agony in Afghanistan and body bags of our brightest because of a suicide bomber. We, the fallen, are falling. We turn to today’s text from the lectionary, hold our hands open for nourishment from this table, and lament to the Lord. Let us pray: God of grace and glory, evil surrounds us, fears abound in us. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days. Amen.

Our lectionary passage for today comes from the book of James, chapter 2, selected verses 1 through 17.

I had just turned into the grocery store parking lot when I watched a Camry nearly get impaled by a Jeep. Jeep ran a stop sign on his way to a parking space, forcing Camry to slam on the brakes. Camry pulled into an open spot, got out of his car and bolted over to Jeep. Camry, with a bright red face, shook his finger and unleashed a stream of expletives at Jeep, who walked away. Camry got back in his car — embellished with a Christian symbol — and a sticker from his church. He was a parishioner in my former congregation. (*Aren’t you glad I said former?*)

None of us are perfect. Today we may be Camry — short-tempered, frustrated, fighting disrespected, or we may be Jeep — thoughtless, or entitled, or selfishly distracted. We need the transforming power of the faith we espouse and try to daily live. Faith shapes our actions so that we act more like Jesus. And when we don’t, it matters.

“Do you with your acts of favoritism *really believe* in Jesus Christ?” James asks. Substitute anything for “acts of favoritism” and there is a fundamental problem of religion. Sin. With your acts of idolatry, your acts of dishonesty, your acts of moral superiority, your acts of parsimoniousness, your road rage — do you really believe?

If only we could perfectly practice what we preach. Working and praying for coherence between our true values and our lived experiences, we struggle to live comfortably in that space between judgement and mercy. Sure, we’re sinful and we do unfaithful things — but as Christ’s followers, we still must live our faith confidently, stand up for the Gospel, tell people of our transformed lives — even when our behavior suggests, if only for a moment in a parking lot, otherwise. Whatever we encounter in families, at work, and of course, church — we try to lead with our faith, not our flaws.

In the church of you my youth, our married Clerk of Session had an affair with the soprano section leader in the choir. With the encouragement of my mom, I asked my pastor why there were no consequences. Faith, he said, is learning to live uncomfortably in the moral gray, to float between judgement and mercy, to prayerfully discern which should be applied. Had I walked in the elder's shoes? Judge not, he suggested, lest ye be judged — a spiritual principle rather scarce these days thanks to our merciless social media.

From Camry, to the Clerk, to the one you see in the mirror — we're human. I know I am. When a scoundrel of a used car salesman sold me a Ford with literally no oil in it, owning what was now a worthless vehicle — I wasted no time in calling the manager and giving him a severe verbal thrashing, laced with a few loud threats and language unbecoming of a woman of the cloth. "Oh, I see you are a minister," said the manager. "How's that working out for you? God must be so pleased with you." His judgement was mercy that helped me become better. He, however, remained a scoundrel. Yet, transformation is not retroactive. Many pastors who decide after college to go to Seminary return to their high school reunion only to hear these words, "Wait... *You're a..... pastor?*"

The fact is that people of faith are judged to a higher standard. Some deal with that pressure by becoming judgmental, probably not the best response. The Barna Group, in a sweeping survey of non-Christians from ages 16 to 29 found a new generation skeptical of the Christian faith and frustrated by bad encounters with Christians whose words and deeds misrepresent Christ. Ungodly high numbers of them! 87 percent of respondents perceived Christians as judgmental; 85 percent said we are hypocritical; and 91 percent said we are anti-LGBTQ. Many young folks point out that we worship cultural icons and choose political leaders whose behavior flies in the face of the good book's teachings. The worse, the survey showed, were Christians who cozy up to the powerful and rich but merely pray for the poor. For them, what used to be Christianity is now "*Christianity.*" "Lord Jesus, save me from your followers," their bumper stickers say.

Adam Grant put it like this: "Integrity is walking the talk. Your actions live up to your words. Authenticity is only talking what you already walk. Your words reflect your actions. It's good to practice what you preach. It's better to reserve your preaching for the principles you consistently practice." Principles we consistently practice he said — not *perfectly* practice. What did James say? Mercy triumphs over judgement.

Do we *really* believe? James puts the mirror before us, advising us to do good works that won't call our beliefs into question. What's most important? How we treat the poor. His people were playing favorites with the rich and he calls out this partiality, for they do not understand the God they claim to follow, this God of indiscriminate love. He calls us out, too. In this large congregation of privilege, James's words hold water. Commentator David Keck wrote, "The church is a community, but also a business and a building that is trying to survive. We might be focusing more on developing budgets than developing our prayer lives. We try to live out our faith with good works. But it takes money to do good works."

Because struggle is real, First Pres is intentional about being partial to the poor, for "God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom." We try to be impartial within that partiality, for we know the tendency to break the poor down into categories — the "worthy poor" and the "unworthy poor" — and to be partial to some of them. Some poor are blameless, hard-working, struggling, ashamed of where they are and prayerful, hopeful, determined to get out. Some were abandoned by family, or struggle with mental illness. Others we judge as lazy, complacent, and just

waiting for handouts — comfortable victims. We judge them on how they spend the limited income they have. So we struggle to be impartial within our partiality.

James is calling us to something more. In this gray, complex world, James still calls us to impartiality. Indiscriminate love, something far more than radical hospitality that reaches wider than open hearts, minds, and arms. Once we FAVOR one over the other in any category of poverty — poor in money, poor in health, poor in education, poor in wisdom, or perspective — we are not practicing the indiscriminate love of Christ.

There are any number of human differences where we try not to discriminate — race, religion, gender, politics, nationality, and what school's name is on our degree all come to mind. In today's passage, James names financial status as the most blatant example of unchristian discrimination. Notice James does not condemn the rich. He does not damn the *haves* over the *have nots*. His issue is favoritism, those who would choose to associate with the rich at the expense of the poor. Beloved, James says — when we play favorites, we “discriminate,” we judge, and we put ourselves in the place of God. James is not calling us not to favoring one over the other, but to indiscriminate love.

The author Will Campbell showed us how to love without limits. Campbell arose from deep, poor Mississippi to become an activist for racial justice. Later a chaplain at Ole Miss, he received death threats from the white right as the only white guy at the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Over the years, he couldn't stop thinking that he hated those hillbilly bigots who hated. Looking in the mirror, he saw himself taking sides and playing favorites. He enjoyed the thought that God hated all the same people he hated. A biographer writes, “He had subverted the indiscriminate love of God for all people without conditions, limits, or exceptions into a ministry of ‘liberal sophistication’. With these convictions, he started sipping whiskey with the Ku Klux Klan. He did their funerals and weddings, and befriended the Grand Dragon of North Carolina. When they were sick he emptied their bed pans.” He received death threats from the left. Campbell said, though, that since God doesn't play favorites, neither should he. Campbell pursued indiscriminate love. Could you cozy up with the KKK? Could you cozy up with the rich? James calls us to a way of living our faith that will take hard work, for faith without work is dead.

But there is something else. James tells us that for a God of indiscriminate love, Jesus is pretty partial, calling us to honor those who have been dishonored — especially the poor. Tom Long, who will be in this pulpit next week, wrote, “James is trying his best to get the church to display *partiality* of a different kind — God's partiality. The American image of justice is a blindfolded woman holding balance scales, the biblical image is instead a God who sees everything and sets things right. God is not impartial; She chooses the weak and establishes justice.” James demands a partiality in pursuit of justice and mercy. God's indiscriminate love is partial to the weak and those in need of mercy. If we get there – to a place when all is set right — then we can sustain an impartiality that will thrive. But for

now, we have to follow Jesus, we have to get ourselves on the side of the poor, we have to work tirelessly to get them what they need— money, food, equal access to and desire for education, mental health, physical care, motivation, spiritual support, dignity. Because of who God is, that’s who we must be.

In the words of Tom Long, “The church is called not to play favorites, but to let the light of Christ disclose genuine worth. We don’t ask our ushers to smile with equal warmth toward all who come to worship.... For in the economy of God’s grace, the very ones for whom the world has little regard have become the guests of honor in the household of God.”

James helps us clarify who God is. God loves indiscriminately. God is partial to the poor in hard times, and in all times. In just the last week, so much was lost by so many. To the poor, the poor in spirit, the poor in hope, to all the knocked down and out — we, the fallen, must put our faith to work, walk in their shoes, and cozy up to our God who chooses mercy over judgement every time — and *really* believe in a faith that takes hard work. Amen.

© 2021 Melissa Anne Rogers