

Scripture

James 2:1-17;

Warning against Partiality

2 My brothers and sisters, do you hold the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ without acts of favouritism? 2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 9 But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

11 For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Faith without Works Is Dead

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Mark 7:24-37

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

27 He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

29 Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” 30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Jesus Cures a Deaf Man

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” 35 And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Sermon:

As we work through the book of Mark we encounter what first seems like a fairly standard event in Jesus ministry. A woman heard that Jesus was in town, came and knelt at his feet, and begged him to free her daughter from a demon.

This feels like a familiar scene – many people ask Jesus for healing and deliverance. Two things are different though. First, Jesus is far from home. Now, in one sense that is nothing new – divine Jesus is about as far from his heavenly home as he can get aside from his time in the tomb – but on a more practical, factual level Jesus is no longer in Israel. He’s not among God’s chosen but somewhere else, far to the north, seeking quiet and solitude.

So, Jesus was not where we would expect to find him, but more than that, Jesus was acting in a way that we also wouldn’t expect. He turned away a suffering human being. Granted, the woman did interrupt his time of retreat, but Jesus was routinely dogged by crowds of people who would not let him alone. He never said no before.

Not only did Jesus refuse the woman’s request, but if I heard this correctly, didn’t he just call her a dog? ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,’ he told her.

That’s harsh. It would be an insulting thing to say today, and that’s taking into account that for most of us dogs are cuddly critters that are part of the family. Back in Jesus’ time dogs were mostly stray curs that scavenged through garbage and were considered unclean – defiled animals that contaminate all they touch.

Jesus’ words to this woman were strong words and they make me uncomfortable. His words don’t line up with the gentle Jesus that I picture in my head. Jesus’ words don’t feel very pastoral or affirming.

Various commentaries of the bible explain that Jesus was only saying that his healing was for the children of Israel first and only then for the Gentiles, but that doesn't really soften things for the woman. Suffering demands relief now, not a vague promise for some time in the future.

This idea of deferring help is something that Nancy and I face in the office on a regular basis – Nancy much more frequently than I. Most of you are aware that we give gift cards for the local grocery store to people in need who come to the door. These gift cards are replenished every month.

On Monday, nineteen people came to our doors. Nineteen. We went through the entire month's supply of gift cards in a matter of hours.

How do you say to someone who is homeless, hungry, and dirty "I'm sorry, I can't help you. But be sure to come back in a month when we will have more cards."

I'm sorry you're hungry now, but maybe I can do something in a month. If you're still alive. How crushing is that for someone to hear, someone who perhaps has nowhere else to turn. Anyone who truly suffers knows all too well that help deferred is help denied.

The situation was the same for the woman whose daughter had the demon. For her, hearing that she might expect help once all the children of Israel had been cleansed, clothed, and fed was a bucket of cold water thrown on the smallest spark of hope. How long would it take to serve all the children of Israel? Even if that were ever accomplished, what would be the chances that she would ever bump into Jesus again?

What this text reminds me is that the world is comprised of the *haves* and the *have-nots*. There are some who reap the benefits and others who have to wait in line. There are children, and there are dogs. It was quite clear in biblical times; there were the Israelites and then Gentiles. It didn't matter if you were an Edomite, Cushite, Egyptian, Philistine, or even SyroPhoenecian like the woman in our story. If you were not one of God's people you were a Gentile – someone else – other. Not one of us.

Today we have many different ways of determining who is one of us. There are the developed nations, and those trying to catch up; the northern hemisphere, and southern hemisphere; white Canadians, and aboriginal Canadians; educated, and not educated; liberal, and conservative; those who contribute to climate change, and those who suffer its effects. We also have the churchd, and the unchurchd.

We slice up society in many different ways but it comes down to the same thing; we have a need to determine who is in and who is out. Perhaps that is why Jesus' response to the woman asking for help seems so shocking. It doesn't sound like something Jesus would say, rather his rejection of this woman seems much more like something we would say.

No. We don't want to help you. You're not one of us, you're not my tribe, let your own people take care of you, we only have enough for ourselves.

We'll go broke if we try to help all the poor people who come to our doors. I don't want my tax dollars going towards supporting those addicts out there. As long as there is unemployment we should stop letting immigrants into our country.

These are ugly and divisive statements, yet they are pervasive. I encounter words like these in conversation and on social media. Many people are so afraid of being on the 'out' side that they spend their times drawing imaginary fault lines and casting other people onto the other side.

We create lines of race, language, religion, education, social position, and especially money. In James' epistle he cautions especially about being fooled by the appearance of wealth. He writes of how men of distinction with fine clothes and jewelry are often treated with much more deference than those with a poorer appearance. He's not just talking about in general, but he's specifically writing about how we welcome people in church!

Father Paul across the square lent me a book this past week and in it I read a funny, yet revealing vignette. The author wrote of a time that he visited a church and though there were empty seats the usher led him upstairs to the balcony. He didn't think much of it at the time, but as others were ushered in he noted that they were all odd in one manner or another; shabby clothes, wild hairdos, tattoos, piercings. The author himself was a heavysset man wearing overalls with wild hair and a beard – kind of a John the Baptist type by his own description. He realized that the church he was visiting televised its worship services and that the usher was intentionally segregating the 'unsightly' people to the balcony where they would not be visible to the television audience.

This seems to be very much what James was writing about – that we have a tendency to treat others differently based on appearance and social standing. James went on to note that if anything we should treat the poor better than the rich since it is the rich who make our lives difficult.

The poor aren't taking jobs away from anyone, and the jobs they are taking are not jobs that most people would want to apply for anyway.

James reminded his readers that the rich are the ones "who oppress you and drag you into court" This isn't an overstatement. James wrote his epistle early in the history of the church, to saints who had been scattered by the persecution that began with Stephen's martyrdom. James's readers were in real danger from actual rich people who wanted to stamp out the newly formed Jesus movement. One only has to remember what Saul was doing before Jesus transformed him into Paul to see what James was writing of.

The rich are still making life difficult for regular folk – remember the financial meltdown in 2008? After the rich broke the financial system, regular people around the world lost their savings, their homes, and then were burdened with trillions of dollars of government debt – that is, future taxes – to bail out all those rich corporations so that they wouldn't feel the loss.

The sense of unfairness that regular workers feel, even a decade later, as austerity measures remain in place for them while the rich increase their share of the pie is exactly what the present populist leaders tap into to gain support.

This is not to say that all rich people are evil, but it demonstrates James' point, which was that we ought not treat rich people better since they are much more likely to be a source of trouble for us than a benefit.

All of this comes down to division. The haves and the have-nots. Those who are in and those who are out. All of this fighting over limited resources is the way of the world. The accuser whispers that there may not be enough, so grab what you can and hold it. Satan would have us believe that life is a zero sum game, that there is a limited amount of love, respect, prestige, healing, deliverance, acceptance, contentment so we need to hoard what we can by shutting other people out.

The problem is that whenever we draw lines shut people out, we will find that Jesus is sitting on the side with the poor and unfortunate, looking back at us.

God's kingdom is not a kingdom of fear and privation. Our God is a god of abundance. Out of nothing God brought everything. Out of a bunch of slaves God made a mighty nation. Out of a shepherd God made a king. Out of me, God made a human being. God knows no limits, no bounds.

So why is it that we turn away from God to instead live limited lives? I don't understand the foolishness of such an act, even as I find myself doing exactly that. I guess this is what Paul was writing of in Romans 'I do those very things I hate, while I don't do the things that I want to do. It's not even me anymore acting, but sin acting in and through me.'

We lead strangely diminished lives. We see through a looking-glass darkly. We are not yet what we are intended to be. But we are not abandoned. Not by a long shot.

I won't pretend to understand why Jesus seemed to engage in a conversation about us and them, why he appeared to be shutting out this woman because of where she was born. I admit that I don't get it, and it will remain a mystery to me.

Everything else that I know of Jesus points to reconciliation. On the cross the earth shook, the veil tore, the lines dividing heaven and earth blurred; tombs opened and the living and the dead intermingled; the criminal and the holy one communed; Gentile and Jew together stood in awe of the Son of God.

It took a cross to break the dividing wall between the Jews with their spiritual riches and the Gentiles who were without God and without hope in the world. It takes a cross to break down the dividing wall of rich and poor. It takes a cross to break down the barriers between races and genders. The sacrifice of the cross speaks to people of all languages, and its message is quite simple. In Christ there is no longer Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female; all are one in Christ Jesus.

When it comes right down to it, all of our dividing and competition and cutting people out was because we were already on the wrong side. That is why we fell for the devil's words of fear. All of the posturing and put downs are weak attempts at justification by trying to prove to ourselves that there are others worse than ourselves. All of it is a way of pointing at our brother and saying 'He's worse than me.'

The cross has made all of this unnecessary. The cross bridged the gap between heaven and earth; the cross made a way for all of us who should be on the outside to be invited into God's abundant kingdom.

On the cross we get a glimpse of how far beyond our comprehension God really is, and how much beyond our imagination God's love extends. Then we see how foolish and meaningless our distinctions are. To think there was ever some kind of limit to God's grace.

You can all be in. Jesus made sure of that on the cross. If you're in Jesus, then you're in, and Jesus doesn't turn away anybody who is sincere of heart.

No more slave, no more Greek. Just one body, one heart, one spirit.

The politics of division belong to Satan. Welcome instead to the radical openness and lavishly wasteful love of God who wills that all will be one, today, and always.

Amen.