

GOD'S PARTIALITY

Last Sunday, as we explored the opening chapter of the letter of James we were reminded of what James viewed as “pure” and “undefiled” religion: “... to care for orphans and widows in their distress.” In other words, to look to most vulnerable in society and fully embrace them as our neighbors – as those we are called to love. This morning, in the second chapter James presents us with an illustration to see if we are passing this fundamental test.

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, 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’, have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

So, if as preacher Thomas Long puts it, the person who arrives “in minks and gold rings is promptly ushered to a choice pew, but a poor person who shows up in rags is relegated to the bleachers”, you’re missing the point.

The passage, while speaking directly to us, centuries later, would have had a particular edge to its original audience. The faith community in the time of James was surrounded by a culture of favoritism, in which the rich and powerful were shown honor in the hope of receiving some form of beneficiary treatment in return. Even more to the point, chances are a good portion of the faith communities James was addressing would have been made up of poor people since at the time there were the super-rich, the rich, and basically everyone else. When we hear this passage today, we hear it largely as middle class, educated folks who may not be rich but who aren’t necessarily poor either. Money still talks in our society, but it can be argued that our culture today isn’t nearly as grounded in a system of favoritism, but an economics of exploitation and discrimination. We may not go through life seeking to curry favor with the wealthy but we are nonetheless enmeshed in a system of partiality. Which can lead us to miss how this passage can catch us off guard even today.

When I listen to this passage I hear echoes of Hannah’s Song, Mary’s Magnificat, and the Beatitudes all of which speak of a topsy-turvy world where up is down and down is up where the poor are rich, and the rich are sent away empty. Where God continually confounds us with who God chooses to favor. I also hear echoes of the Jesus parable of the rich man and Lazarus and his words about dinner table etiquette: “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” I think of those who remain marginalized even today within many of our churches race, gender, sexual orientation, physical appearance, mental health. The church is intended to be the place where all who enter are fully welcome, including those who may find to be alien, even threatening simply by their appearance. Are we truly impartial, even-handed in our welcome?

Before we answer “yes” too quickly let us pause to consider that as James describes things, God is not exactly impartial. God is actually partial – to the poor. Not even-handed, not blind justice, but impassioned advocacy, love, partiality for those who are poor. What does this mean for us?

The challenge for the mainline church – including us – is that our very privilege, the ways that we move through society, invites to keep at arm’s length, the very people God calls us to be close to. To move beyond an attitude of compassionate giving where we are always the giver and others receivers to a place of neighbor-love solidarity. A place where our neighbor, whatever their wealth or status is truly our brother or sister – our equal before God. One with whom we mutually give and receive. This past week, Mary Luti, had in a Stillspeaking devotional noted:

To approach Communion was to be diagnosed, admitted, treated, and released to a new regimen of health, body, mind, and soul.

Communion also vaccinated you against the estrangement that destroys human solidarity. Being in communion with the Healer and all our convalescing siblings in the church staved off deadly infections like hate and greed, like an oblivious and evasive life.

Communion was also a foretaste of the full health of the life to come. Exactly what such a fully wholesome life would be like, no one knew, but it had to be at least something like this: the beloved as one in the Beloved, feasting.

But the most important thing was how you knew Communion medicine was taking. The church’s body was getting well when it found itself tending the bodies of others, when it put its own body on the line.

Which is why examining ourselves and confessing has traditionally preceded Communion. It’s a wellness check, and if it shows we’ve been indifferent or hostile to our neighbors’ bodies, the prescription is clear: we need to come to the table again. And again. To take the Medicine that heals us, then go and do otherwise.

As we approach the table this morning, let us take James’ words to heart, confessing those times when we have been both impartial and not partial enough to the neighbors God is calling us to embrace. As we break the bread and share the cup may we find healing – for others, and ourselves and we are recalled into a loving community where all are fully embraced as God’s children and our partiality is directed to the very least among us and throughout our community.

AMEN