

May 31st: All God's Favorites

Good morning again my friends, and welcome to our series, Mosaic–this is a series devoted to exploring the intentional diversity of our Bible, Jesus' ministry, and the world-wide church. We believe that diversity was always God's plan–so we'll be taking a closer look at how we can appreciate that diversity, work towards equity for a wide variety of individuals and groups, and make inclusion a core tenet of our faith and practice. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are not bad words in God's vocabulary–they are in fact essential to the love and transformation that God promises us as part of our personal and the renewing of our world.

Together we'll discover how we can embrace this reality and build stronger communities that truly reflect God's character and compassion. I hope that by the end of this series, you feel even more eager to welcome new people, hear other perspectives, and honor the experiences of people who might look, act, believe, and live differently than we do.

Before we reflect on today's passage together, I invite you to pray with me.

Loving God, your holy text reminds us of your deep and sustaining love for each of us, a love that surrounds us and strengthens us without any regard for our worthiness or stature. You simply love us, because love is who you are. Today we reflect on this divine love, and try to imagine what it might look like for us to love each other in a similar way. We seek your wisdom now, as we grapple with how this love might topple or disrupt our human realities of hierarchy and preference. Reassure us, but also challenge us to see the world with your eyes. Amen.

I'm pretty sure I've told this story before, but since I can't remember exactly when, I'm going to repeat it. When I was in college, our campus chaplain, Pastor Judy, was the north star of our student body. Each week, she would preach in our Wednesday chapel service, and she sometimes preached at our Sunday evening Collegelife service as well, the student led worship where our

weekly benediction originated. Many times, when she was leading and encouraging her college students, I heard her say: “Don’t you know? You’re one of God’s favorites, just like everyone else!” She would even claim it too, saying, “I’m one of God’s favorites, just like everyone else!”

At different times in my life, this statement has meant different things to me. When I’m struggling with my own insecurities or feelings of disappointment in myself, I hear Pastor Judy’s words, and I can remember that God loves me, just as I am. I am God’s favorite! And when I’m challenged to love others, especially people in my life who sometimes make that feel difficult, I can still hear Pastor Judy, and I am reminded that God loves those individuals just as much as God loves me. Everyone else is God’s favorite too! It’s been a good mantra to keep in mind, as I’ve navigated different seasons and as I’ve encountered all kinds of different people. In every season, I hear Pastor Judy’s reassurance, and I can hold onto that wisdom of belovedness and compassion. That’s what I hope for all of us, as we dig in deeper to today’s topic!

When a lot of us imagine the Bible, or the biblical world, we might assume that everything recorded in those pages was perfect: everyone always got along, no one ever hurt another person's feelings, and nothing bad ever happened to God's people. That is obviously not the case, as the Bible is full of human beings, and not idealized characters. But we still might believe that Jesus and his friends were perfect examples of faith and behavior, and while that might be true of Jesus, it is definitely not the case for his friends. None of the disciples were inherently bad people or evil, but there are ways that they missed the mark. They tried really hard to live in ways that honored God, but sometimes they let their human impulses get the better of them and things like hierarchy and competition and comparison snuck in, sometimes in visible ways, and sometimes in more hidden ones.

Well, we know that they had their own struggles—we have multiple bible stories to prove it. In both Mark 9 and Luke 9, we hear that multiple disciples are discussing their “ranking” in the kingdom of God. In both Matthew 20 and Mark 10, James and John ask Jesus who will sit on his right and left hands

when he sits on his heavenly throne. And in Luke 22, during the Last Supper, we once again have the disciples arguing about who should be considered the greatest. Ugh. And then, in the Gospel of John, our biblical author blatantly refers to himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” a title that separates him from his friends. If Jesus’ best friends act like this, what hope do the rest of us have? Right? They were up close and personal with Jesus’ teaching and love, and yet still gave in to unhealthy dynamics like foolish rivalry and hostility!

Unfortunately, these tendencies continue into the life of the early church, as these newly founded congregations wrestled with the realities of their mosaic members. And this is where we’re going to draw our inspiration for today.

If you’ve got your Bible with you today, or if you want to pull out your phone and follow along, we’re going to take a closer look at the New Testament book of James. James is writing in the late 1st or early 2nd century to a primarily Jewish audience in diaspora, meaning that they are spread out in many different communities and cultures. These Jews turned Jesus followers are constantly encountering people who are different than they are, and they’re dealing with all of the usual socioeconomic and cultural issues that can be found within religious or social groups. This included very real concerns about status and poverty, as some people tried to climb the financial ladder, some slipped into increasingly vulnerable positions on the margins of society. As merchants mixed with the widowed and medically fragile, these newly formed congregations had to figure out how to bridge these socioeconomic gaps.

James is trying to address this, and he does so using a mix of Jesus’ teachings and some rhetorical elements that were common in both ancient wisdom literature and Greco-Roman philosophy. Above all, James is concerned with ethical living—his primary purpose is asking these new Christians to live in alignment with God’s love and liberating salvation. And so, he responds to the conflicts that we see in the Gospels and the reality of his time period with this fervent plea to avoid favoritism.

Starting in verse 2, he writes, “Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

This is probably not just a thought exercise or hypothetical situation for James’ audience—this is likely something that these early communities had experienced. In fact, we have a record of this exact dynamic found in 1 Corinthians, where a congregation is facing these concerns. In this church, wealthy attendees and the poorer members were split into two separate meals—with differing levels of food and drink. But this wasn’t just any meal, like a potluck or our Sunday family meals—this meal was the celebration of the Lord’s Supper—the sacrament of bread and wine. This was the remembrance of Jesus’ final words! And this community decided that it was okay to make that event a segregated space. Now, I will say that it was a common phenomenon in the Roman world to separate people by social class, but that’s not something that James wants these Christians to emulate. He’s telling them that the church should be different from the rest of the world—it should be a space where all people are brought together, regardless of their fine or filthy clothes.

He continues with these thoughts: “Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?”

Here, James calls back to the Sermon on the Mount, the most important public teaching given by Jesus, in which he proclaims, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” In these verses, James reminds them of this promised reality, and confronts his audience’s preference for the rich and comfortable

among them. He tells them that although they might welcome the wealthy into their congregations, it is the wealthy that are exploiting them, and profiting off of them. James is observing that his fellow Jewish Christians are desperate to be close to and attain status and prosperity for themselves, which resulted in a rejection of the very people that Jesus calls the most blessed and honored. James noticed that these early Christians sometimes preferred to be in the company of the unjust and cruel to benefit themselves, instead of building relationships with the vulnerable groups that Jesus intentionally blessed. Like the disciples, they were jockeying for position or favors, forgetting Jesus' command to be servants.

James closes this passage with these final words of advice: "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."

I know this sounds harsh, and it is. James meant for it to sound like a rebuke. It's the correction that his audience needs, and the warning that we modern Christians should hear if we want to live into God's mosaic. James wants all of us to be crystal clear: things like favoritism, rivalry, and neglect of the poor have no place in God's kingdom. If the church is only a space for the wealthy or the privileged or the already powerful, then it's not actually a church—it's just an exclusive social club based on worldly values. God's vision for a mosaic world includes making space for people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, no exceptions.

But how should we apply this wisdom? How do we take these ancient words and practice them in our own places and spaces?

First, I think James would encourage us to avoid unnecessary hierarchy and stratification. This means ensuring that no one in our communities feels like a second class citizen. This goes for socioeconomic status, but also for race, gender, age, sexual identity, and ability. That might include interrogating our

own preferences or tendencies—noticing when we are comparing ourselves to our friends or trying to jockey for position or power. It might mean getting out of comfort zone by getting more proximate to the unhoused or the struggling—can we see their reality and get closer, rather than back away? It means creating equitable access to resources so that everyone has a chance to not just survive, but thrive. It means that our communion table and Family Meals are open to everyone—no one gets turned away.

Second, because we are all fully individual and beloved children of God, I think James would recommend that we avoid stereotyping each other or judging each other based on surface characteristics. Ask yourself, do you jump to unfounded opinions about certain people or groups? Do you notice how hurtful these stereotypes can be when they minimize or misrepresent someone? I know, these kinds of judgments and categorizations can feel increasingly common in our culture, but they don't have to be. I'd like to close with a video that I think will show us a better way. It's called "Don't Put People in Boxes," and I want us to think about James' advice while we watch.

[*watch video*](#)

What I love about this video, beyond the mosaic that it showcases, is that it proves that we can't always guess someone's story by what they look like. If we accept or reject each other based on what we can see or perceive about each other, we will never reach the deeper relationships that God has designed us for. If we are content to associate or disassociate with some people because of outward qualities, then we will miss out on the rich community that God's mosaic has to offer. When we judge, or when we play favorites, or when we compete with each other, we will miss out on what brings us together.

All of us are God's favorites, just like everybody else. My friends, may you rest secure in your belovedness, and may you always see that belovedness in others. Amen.