

15th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
September 5, 2021

Text: James 2:1-10 and 14-17

Theme: The Royal Law

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

We left off last Sunday with James 1:27 –
Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this; to
care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself un-
stained by the world.

Now we move into the opening verses of James 2. James gives us a
concrete example on how to guard ourselves against the ways of this
world and he starts with the church. He poses what we assume to be a
hypothetical situation in which a person with expensive clothes walks
into a church building followed by a street person who is disheveled.
The ushers escort the well-dressed person to the best seat in the house
and ignores the street person (or worse) suggests that he/she would be
more comfortable in the back pew.

Such a scenario is not so hypothetical. I have seen this played out in
other churches just as James described or with some slight variations.
We have worked hard at Redeemer to be a welcoming church. It has
become a critical part of our ministry to have greeters physically open
the door when anyone enters the church (guest or member) and not
just prop the doors open. We offer everyone a warm greeting. We
offer hospitality after each service to get to know each other in
Christian love. It is important for us to not only do the faithful thing
but to understand the reasoning behind such gestures.

And that is what James explains to us next. God has chosen the
disheveled street person and the poor to be rich in faith and to inherit
his kingdom. God has chosen anyone who is down-and-out to be full
citizens with all its rights and privileges.

James then boldly calls into question our faith. Can we say we are
believers in Jesus Christ and then turn around and dishonor the very
people God embraces?

We read these lessons and come to the conclusion that God only has a
heart for the poor. James clarifies that for us as well. God is not
putting a wedge between the rich and the poor because both belong in
his kingdom. God's preference for the poor is not a condemnation of
the rich. The main issue is that we have a tendency to favor one over
the other. We tend to associate with the rich at the expense of the
poor. James reminds us that our whole-hearted faithfulness to God
will require whole-hearted faithfulness to the least of our brothers and
sisters, to orphans and widows, to our neighbors who are hungry, to
those whom we often do not even see because we are so busy we
walk right past them.

And to emphasis his point James then reminds us of the Golden Rule:
We shall love our neighbor as ourselves. In the gospels Jesus makes
this a commandment second to the one in which we are to love the
Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our
mind, and with all our strength. Jesus quoted it to the rich young man
who wanted to know what good deed he needed to do to have eternal
life. He was to love his neighbor as himself. We hear the words
again when a lawyer asked Jesus the same question. What must I do
to enter eternal life? Jesus turned the question back on the lawyer
who knew the right answer. But the lawyer did not know how to
define the term neighbor. Jesus told him the story about the Good
Samaritan.

Our lesson from James is about favoritism or choosing to associate
with the rich at the expense of the poor. But it is also about loving
our neighbor as ourselves (to bridge the gap between us). Our call is
to stand in the space between the rich and poor, the place between the
privileged and the forgotten. In theological terms it is the place of the
cross. Jesus lived his life in this space believing that we would follow
in his footsteps.

I came across a term this week in my studies that best described this
space. It is called the tragic gap. The term originated with Parker
Palmer, an American writer, educator, and activist who has spent his
life focusing on issues of education, spirituality, and social change.
He is also the founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal.

In one of his podcasts Palmer describes the tragic gap as the distance between the hard realities around us and what we know is possible not because we wish it were so but because we have seen it with our own eyes. He then suggests that we need to stand and act in that gap.

In his book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, Palmer calls us to return to a vision of what is possible, to bridge the divide that we use to separate us, and to create community. He understands that there is always more to be done (that we will never achieve perfection) (that there is always a gap) but in the gap we can envision a world where differences are valued and appreciated and even welcomed.

Last Sunday we went through the litany of struggles that we face in our personal lives and globally. It is tempting to give up hope that anything we do can have a real impact and as a result we resign ourselves to doing nothing at all. We hope for a change that never comes and as a result we never engage with the world as it really is.

James finishes his chapter by encouraging us to step into that gap in faith and then get to work. We are to step into that gap and let our faith produce the endurance we need to act. We are to step into that gap and not only welcome the street person who walks through our church doors but build a relationship with them. It is what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. As people and communities of faith we are called to live and work in that tragic gap because that is where we find real hope and real change.

I first discovered this term on the website of the Lutheran Volunteer Corps. It states that its members accept the invitation of Palmer to stand and act in the tragic gap: to seek justice even at times when justice seems out of reach.

LVC knows that justice is possible because they have seen it. So they march forward with a vision that includes meeting people in their struggles. We join them in raising the banner of hope to stand and act in the tragic gap. We join the many faithful people in the world (both known and unknown) who never saw their cause fully realized before they died (people such as Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela and Rosa Parks) but believed that others would follow in their footsteps.

James calls us not to choose between rich and poor, black and white, young and old, first world and third world, free and imprisoned, sick and healthy, naked and clothed, hungry and fed. James calls us to stand at the foot of the cross with Christ and take residence with him in the gap between what is and what should be. It is the faith we profess and must (in the words of James) come with works. It does no good to say to the disheveled person – Be clothed in Christ. Be filled with the Holy Spirit – and then walk away without providing so much as a coat or a cup of cold water. Amen