

“You Do Well If”

Salado UMC—9 September 2018: 16th after Pentecost

Preaching Text: James 2:1-17—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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“A bad neighbor is a misfortune, as much as a good one is a great blessing”

Hesiod—(~800 BCE, *Works and Days*).

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An issue that vexed the early church partiality to the wealthy. We have similar issues today. We like/honor folks who have money—and more crucially—we want them to like us! James might tell us, if he were still alive today: “May we not be likened to the inscription found in a Deadwood, South Dakota museum left by a beleaguered prospector: ‘I lost my gun. I lost my horse. I am out of food. The Indians are after me. But thank God, I’ve got all the gold I can carry’ ” (*Today in the Word*, March 1989, p. 34)! Hear the day’s lesson from James:

1 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 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.

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 (James 2:1-10, 14-17).

Informed Lutherans recognize that their namesake, Martin Luther, did not have much enthusiasm for the Epistle of James. In fact, Luther writes:

In a word St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it (M. Luther).

Many theologians consider Luther's "dispute" with James concerned with doctrine. Luther allegedly thought James uninspiring in its gospel portrayal. He believed that with little effort, James' readers might use James' theology to advance works-righteousness. While perhaps true enough, there may be something else that irked Luther with respect to this "epistle of straw" as he called it. We know that there are differing ways to say similar things. For example, a person might say something about "business as usual" while another person might suggest that phrase means "the same old thing:" same idea—different words. What I want to suggest is that James' gospel emphasis may have not suited Luther as obvious or explicit enough. We find an example of an offending verse, according to Luther, just beyond our morning text. At James 2:24 we read: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." Rather than an "either/or" claim that Luther habitually favors, James writes about justification in "both/and" terminology.

Let's look a closer at the concerns of today's text knowing we will be visiting James' epistle for all of September. Here is the \$64,000 question: "Why is being partial a sin?" Each day people ask us to choose from among particulars: friends, paper or plastic, Asian or Hispanic food, country or classic music, and the like. Partiality or preference is a privilege of choice. Yet, James has deeper concerns than our mere superficial proclivities for this specific thing or that. For while showing partiality is inevitable in human affairs, James has a more serious interest. Class divisions that the baptized fashion among themselves in the faith community trouble James. In other words, James, as probably a Jewish-Christian, repeats in different words what Moses teaches in the book of Deuteronomy:

You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is Gods. Any case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it (Deuteronomy 1:17).

James throws down a challenge—you have also heard it elsewhere I would guess: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Is this possible? It is certainly tricky. James plainly calls the faith community to a higher standard—*agapē* or God-like love. A love like this creates a radical call to wide-ranging justice. That is, we act with equity toward all persons regardless of circumstance—especially economic circumstance. In an ideal world of Christian faith envisioned by James, this Christ-like love wins over partiality. But in the real world of daily life, partiality appears to eclipse *agape* love. James calls all believers, rich and poor, to reject partiality. Our solidarity comes from our common bond of treating others fairly and equally—all in Christ.

Speaking of partial, I am partial to reading Luke's flair for the apt story. Luke makes a similar point to James' teaching about equity. It goes like this:

1 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place, 'and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:1, 7-14).

A mentor, the late Dr. Fred Craddock, helped me see that the way we say something can help carry its freighted meaning. Do you remember the story in song from Lerner and Loewe' musical Camelot? Imagine Robert Goulet singing this:

If ever I would leave you
It wouldn't be in summer.
Seeing you in summer I never would go.
Your hair streaked with sun-light,
Your lips red as flame,
Your face with a lustra
that puts gold to shame!

But if I'd ever leave you,
It couldn't be in autumn.
How I'd leave in autumn I never will know.
I've seen how you sparkle
When fall nips the air.
I know you in autumn
And I must be there.

And could I leave you
running merrily through the snow?
Or on a wintry evening
when you catch the fire's glow?

If ever I would leave you,
How could it be in spring-time?

Knowing how in spring I'm bewitched by you so?

Oh, no! not in spring-time!

Summer, winter or fall!

No, never could I leave you at all!

Of course, he could have just stated the obvious: "I'm not leaving!" Luke writes like the first example, and perhaps we could say James writes like the second. Either way they both imply: Christians are to treat one other with justice and equity—because we are siblings in Christ. Just because we say things in a different way does not mean we do not suggest something similar. If we "love one another" despite our outward circumstances, then "we will do well." Amen.

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