

15th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Before we read today's new testament passage, I would like to share with you all some results of some historical research I did as I was preparing for today's sermon.

As many of you know, this sanctuary was rebuilt after it burnt to the ground in 1934. The structure that was consumed by that fire was originally built in 1817. I would like to read to you all a portion of a historical document that recorded the structure of that sanctuary which, it seems, looked a little different than it does today.

"There were forty seats before the pulpit and four on each side of it, making forty-eight. The first range on the south end, [that is, the pew in the very rear of our sanctuary] consisting of four seats, were reserved by the trustees for the colored people..."

In other words, like many churches did in that time, the pews of Shelter Island Presbyterian Church were once organized by race. The black people who were forced to sit in the very back were, in all likelihood, slaves owned by some of the very people we venerate on the plaque above our organ.

Also, here is an account of the pew rental list of Shelter Island Presbyterian Church dated to 1817. It was general practice back then to have congregants rent pews in order to generate income for the church. Typically, the closer the pew was to the pulpit, the more it cost to rent it. Therefore, the richest persons rented the more expensive pews in the front of the sanctuary which, coincidentally, placed them as far as possible from the slaves in the back.

Furthermore, an article in the New York Times referenced a study done in 2002 that lists Long Island as the most racially segregated part of the entire United States of America.

Another interesting tidbit I learned is that in April of 1930, in this very room, the Presbytery of Long Island voted to oppose the ordination of women as elders in this church and every other presbyterian church on Long Island.

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold.*

*The rich and the poor have this in common:
the Lord is the maker of them all.*

*Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.*

*Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.*

*Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;*

*for the Lord pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.*

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 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? 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? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 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. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

We all make distinctions among one another. We make distinctions based on race, on gender, on sexuality, on economic placement, and many other things. We often make these distinctions without really realizing it.

For example, just the other day I was on the ferry coming back to the island from a well-timed Costco run before the craziness that is known as Labor Day Weekend arrived. As I was watching the beautiful sunset over the bay, my view was abruptly obstructed by some young adults, probably in the early 20's, who stepped out of their spotless Lexus to enjoy the view as I was doing from the inside of my dented Toyota Rav4. They were very well dressed with the girls in flashy, revealing sundresses and the guys in their Ralph Lauren polos with their collars flipped and their hair just *perfectly* feathered above their RayBan sunglasses. Now, without even realizing it, before I even had a chance to stop and think about what my reaction *should* have been, I immediately rolled my eyes.

As the ferry reached the island and the gate lifted and I drove off the ferry, I realized that my condescending and judgmental reaction to seeing these people was what we call a conditioned response. A conditioned response is an involuntary reaction that happens not because we choose it to happen but because we have been, in one way or another, *trained* to react in such a manner. I realized, as I drove back to the Manse to unload my groceries, that living on Shelter Island for just one year had already conditioned me to react the way I did. It only took one look at "those people" and I immediately saw them as rich, spoiled, white kids from the Hamptons that have come to ravage my pristine, quiet island by spending their parents' money.

And you know what, it scares me that I do that. It scares me that all it took was one year of living on this island to condition me to judge this particular group of people in such a condescending way. I fervently believe that there is no more important task that God calls us to do than this: to first and

foremost see each other as beloved children of God made in God's image. Every distinction that I make, every judgement I make based on someone's appearance, race, sexual identity, economic status, or whatever, places a barrier between me and them and, consequently, between me and God. And those barriers are a threat to the community that Christ calls us to be.

That's why we need the book of James to remind us that there is plenty of work left to do. Now, before any one accuses me of being nothing but a cynical, "Debbie Downer," I must admit that we have come a long way. We have come a long way from the days when the people who *were* Shelter Island Presbyterian Church kept the African Americans in the rear of the sanctuary. We have come a long way from the days when the decision was made in this very room that women were not to be allowed to serve on the session. Yes, we've come a long way but we must keep ourselves from getting too comfortable. And part of my job as your pastor is to keep us from getting too comfortable. And another thing that keeps both you and me from getting too comfortable is the book of James.

James calls us to stop and think when we are tempted to give ourselves a self-righteous pat on the back. James reminds us that the judgements we place on one another are *not* without consequence. Rather, the divisions we place among ourselves are destructive barriers that are *not* of God's design. This passage from the book of James reminds me that if I convince myself that I don't make distinctions based on someone's appearance, then I am part of the problem and not part of the solution. Today's passage challenges me to see first and foremost not that someone is white or black or gay or straight or rich or poor or "Islander" or "off-Islander" but that they are a beloved child of God. I should see everyone as a beloved child of God because that's how God *always see me* (despite the fact that I've done little to deserve that designation)!

And, you know what, that's really hard! Oh, my God, it's so much harder than we want to admit. I will probably spend literally the rest of my life working on *not* judging people by their appearances or by what my environment has conditioned me to think of them. It's a hard thing to unlearn and it takes constant vigilance, humility, and (perhaps most importantly) *communal accountability and support*. *That's* why we come to this table. We come to this Table to celebrate the Lord's Supper because it's one of the few places in this world where we are not known as sinner, or broken, or trashed, or poor, or marginalized, or worthless, but are simply welcomed and loved as a beloved children of God, no more and no less. We come to this Table to remind ourselves that we worship a God who makes no distinction, who shows no partiality when it comes to dispensing abundant quantities of steadfast love.

We come to this Table because God makes no distinction among us, so neither should we.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.