

“Mercy Triumphs in the End”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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James 2: 1-13

Ah, it’s Labor Day Weekend. It’s the unofficial end of summer and the beginning of autumn. It used to be the holiday reminding us that school is back in session, and in some parts of the country that is still the case. But not around here! For many, they will take advantage of this three-day weekend and travel to see family or friends. For others, they will stay closer to home, work on projects around the house, enjoy cookouts with neighbors and friends, and enjoy this last bit of rest before the busyness of the fall sweeps in.

You know what else we enjoy on Labor Day Weekend as Americans? Sales! Look at today’s advertisements in the newspaper, and it is chock-full of Labor Day sales on all sorts of things – mattresses, electronics, furniture, cars, home improvement items, clothes, jewelry. You name it, a store is going to try and get you to buy it this weekend with special holiday pricing that ends on Monday. Last year, Debbie and I took advantage of the Labor Day Weekend and bought a new washer and dryer for our house, replacing ones we had bought sixteen years earlier. I can’t remember exactly how much we saved off the retail price at Best Buy, but there’s no question that we were motivated to make this major home improvement purchase during the blitz of holiday weekend sales last year.

Most of us fall into that mindset as 21st-century Americans. We can’t wait for the next gadget to be released, or the next upgrade we can make to our home, or the next new piece of clothing we must have. We believe our identity is directly tied to the possessions we own, and so to feel better about ourselves we seek to accumulate more and more stuff. I will be the first to admit that I fall prey to this mentality, especially when it comes to electronics, or tools, or home improvement ideas, or yes, even Legos.

And so, on this holiday weekend when we are bombarded by the American marketing frenzy to buy, buy, buy, what do we read in our scripture lesson today? “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?” (2:5-6). Not exactly the reassuring words I or we wanted to hear as middle-class Americans, huh?

I think in Presbyterian and Protestant traditions, the Letter of James gets a bad rap. The writer of James is often associated with the notion of “works righteousness” – that is, if you do good works, your entrance into heaven is assured. Many times this has been correlated to the Roman Catholic tradition, and so as Protestants who stress “faith by grace alone,” we

tend to distance ourselves from what this biblical writer might have to say to us.

But James does not profess a faith by works alone. Instead, as one commentator says, “James makes a distinction between a dead faith – faith without works – and a living faith, that is always accompanied by works” (Archie Smith, Jr., *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 42). The sign of a living, breathing, vibrant faith in Jesus Christ is when the words we utter are made self-evident by our actions toward our fellow sister or brother in Christ.

In that light, the writer is most concerned when believers allow the social and economic distinctions of the world to infiltrate the life of the Christian community. Primarily, when we allow ourselves to show partiality to those who, in our minds, are more worthy of our attention, time and resources. He describes a situation that could very well happen in any modern-day church today, where a person whose appearance of being rich causes us to respond favorably in comparison to a person who appears to be poor in worldly things. In that situation, “Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” (2:2-4).

James falls back on the Hebraic commandment that Jesus reaffirms in his ministry, as well, which is the foundation of *agape* love: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (2:8). That is what the Christian is called to do in the face of partiality and distinction, when we are tempted to treat others differently based on the world’s classifications. James will not let us make excuses: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (2:10). We are indeed saved by grace, but we also are held accountable by the entirety of what God expects from us as his children. “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty,” James says. “For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:12-13).

As I was doing my reading and preparation for today’s sermon, I found this great quote that spoke so pointedly to not only what James is getting at, but also to what is at the heart of those who are rich and those who are poor. Here is that quote: *Let us consider for a moment who the rich are: insatiable ones, who can never be satisfied and who are much more difficult to be content than the poor. [For example] if we were to make a comparison between the rich and the poor, we would find that just as there are some who are tormented and grieve, and who are led to steal, and engage in many adverse practices, so the majority (of the poor) are content to accept what God has given them and follow their course. But when we come to the rich . . . we find that they are so inflamed and covetous for the goods of this world that we cannot satisfy them: indeed, they are almost grieved if the sun shines on the poor . . .* (John Calvin’s *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, © 1980: 193-94). Interestingly enough, that wasn’t written this year by some modern-day theologian. It was preached in a sermon on Deuteronomy 5:19, “You shall not

steal,” more than 600 years ago. The preacher? None other than John Calvin, one of the “founding fathers” of the Presbyterian Church.

What Calvin and the writer of James is getting at is that God shows no partiality in his love for the world in Jesus Christ. All are loved equally through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Why, then, should we love any differently as disciples of Christ? Why, then, should we show partiality or favoritism to one group, one class, one individual over another, if God has shown no such partiality or favoritism in the boundless grace of the cross? Our motivation should not be grounded in our insatiable desire for the goods of this world (Calvin). Our motivation should be grounded in our trust in the knowledge that “mercy triumphs over judgment,” our gratitude for God’s mercy towards us, and our desire that all – especially the poor – are to be “heirs of the kingdom that God has promised to those who love him” (2:5).

Where do you see the face of the poor? Is it in the weathered face of the man standing at High School Road, who is holding a sign asking for money from passing motorists? Is it in the young mother ahead of you in line at the store, who is using her food stamps to buy the most basic of necessities for her family? Is it in the distraught faces of refugees on the television news, desperately fleeing strife in their homeland while uncertain of where they will eventually go? Is it in the image of a lifeless, two-year-old Syrian boy being carried by a Turkish policeman, after the boy drowned with other refugees seeking a better life than where they had come from?

Jesus acknowledged himself that “you will always have the poor, but you will not always have me” (Matthew 26:11). Perhaps he was reminding us that while the poor will always be present, that does not mean they are to be overlooked or judged. In fact, it is because the poor are always with us that we are given so much to learn about God’s impartial love. It can be overwhelming, to be sure, to consider how much need and want there is around us. But sometimes it takes just a simple act or a change in perspective to help us more deeply appreciate the agape love Christ calls us to embody as the church. I heard that last week from several of the youth as they led worship: from their mission trip experiences they return home humbled and appreciative of all they have, and that motivates them to serve every day as selfless disciples of Jesus Christ. What experience do you need to have to help reorient your perspective and recognize that faith without works is a dead faith?

May we labor every day to love our neighbor as ourselves, embodying the impartial love God has shown us in his only Son, our Lord. And when we are tempted to judge and show partiality, may we remember that mercy triumphs over judgment in the eyes of our Lord – yesterday, today, tomorrow, and always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.