

## “Making Distinctions”

James 2:1-10

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### The Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Prayer: Dear God, we give you thanks for the opportunity to gather in this place and to seek your presence and your will for our lives. Be with us now as we open your word. May the words of my mouth, and the collective, hard thinking of your people, be acceptable and pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

When the ancient first century preacher put the quill to parchment, his words must have come from a heart that had been broken by the way in which the world as he knew it was arranged. He must have seen the abuses. He must have struggled with the glaring favoritism afforded the rich. He must have been troubled in his soul between what he understood the Gospel to be about, and yet the reality, namely that people of good faith who should know better, were turning a blind eye to the huge numbers of people living in poverty and to the enormous disparity between the rich and the poor. In fact, he must have been so troubled by it that that he decided to preach a sermon about it.

At least that's what many believe this Epistle of James to be—an ancient sermon, written down in order to be distributed among some early Christian congregations. Thought to have been written around 90 A.D., scholars have largely ruled out as authors, James, the son of Zebedee, and James, the brother of Jesus. Instead, the author is thought to be some devout follower of another James, perhaps of James the Righteous, who has taken it upon himself to send a message to those early Christians living in various areas of the Roman empire outside of Palestine. And if you read it, there is a kind of Sermon on the Mount quality to its cadence.

Apparently there was a problem in the early church with favoritism toward the wealthy. Imagine such a thing. We do have a weakness for the rich and the glamorous. I have been known to peek in on the lives of the rich and famous by quickly thumbing through a copy of *People* magazine while I'm waiting in line at the grocery store.

And so the description in James is easy to imagine. Two men enter the synagogue or the assembly, one is very rich, wearing a gold ring and a fine robe indicating some kind of nobility or higher status; the other person is poor with dirty clothes. The ushers that day, who could be easily identified because of the carnations pinned to the lapels of their dark suits, begin fawning all over the rich man. “Here, please sit up front, closer to God” And then perhaps, “Excuse me, would you please move out of that seat and let this man have it?” Then there's the poor guy with the filthy clothes. Quickly, a bulletin is stuffed into his hand, he is taken by the elbow and shown to the back row, “We think you'd be comfortable here...” which is another way of saying, “If you insist upon being here among us, *we'd* be more comfortable with you sitting back there, out of sight.”

And then the strong rebuke: Thinking like that—showing partiality and making those kinds of judgments and distinctions over status, wealth and position, isn't just rude or bad manners, it's a form of evil. "Has God not chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom? But you have dishonored the poor."

Well now, that was back in the first century when that sermon about dishonoring the poor was preached. Surely things have improved a great deal over the centuries—so much so that there's no need for a preacher to get up say, today, and preach a sermon calling attention to the way in which the poor continue to suffer and be discriminated against?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 12% of all Americans live in poverty. That rate shoots up significantly if it's a single parent household. The percentage of those in poverty is lowest for whites while 27% of all black people in this country live in poverty. And many sociologists and government officials speculate that those figures are actually understated and that there are really more people living in poverty than gets reported. A recent National Public Radio report stated that 30% of Americans have trouble making ends meet. Talk to anyone who runs or works at a food pantry and they will tell you that the lines are not getting shorter and the demand for food is not decreasing. And that's just here in the United States.

Each day in the world, 25,000 people die from starvation or from hunger related causes. That's one person every three and a half seconds. And in a world where there *is* enough food to go around, isn't it clear that when it comes to the allocation and distribution of the world's resources, partiality is being shown and distinctions are made as to who is valuable and who is expendable?

As people of faith and as followers of Jesus Christ, I believe we are called to a higher law than the bottom line or the free market. We are never to buy into what Walter Brueggeman has so accurately termed the "myth of scarcity," the constantly perpetuated lie that there just isn't enough to go around. There is, it's just that partiality and distinctions have been made and are reflected in the priorities that have been set.

When inner city public schools are allowed to sink into chaos and despair, sacrificing any chance a poor child might have to get an education and get ahead, have not distinctions been made somewhere, in terms of who is deserving of a good education and who is not?

Given the current debate in this country, if you can call it a debate, over health care reform, is it any wonder that the loudest voices don't seem to be those with the most to gain but are instead those who are convinced they have the most to lose?

And a war on poverty, even global poverty, might actually be a winnable war as compared to a war on terrorism which will never be over and will never be won. In fact, a war on poverty might actually be the best offensive weapon this country has in avoiding future terrorist attacks. Different priorities have been set however, than loving ones neighbor.

If you're uncomfortable hearing this it's probably because you're rich. You may not consider yourself rich but let me assure you, given the way the world is ordered, the allocation of the world's resources and the way in which the system generally works for us, we are the rich. And if you don't like what you're hearing, please don't blame me. I'm not simply making this up. This message favoring the poor and criticizing the rich is deeply rooted in scripture. And furthermore, God's favoring of the poor isn't in the Bible because some liberal social theorist forced it in there kicking and screaming. It's in there because it was there from the beginning.

Listen to Moses,

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your own community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be (Deut. 15:7-8).

Or hear the words of Isaiah,

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday (Isaiah 58:6-7, 9-10).

And it was Jesus who said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. Blessed are you poor." And when you host a lavish banquet, don't exclude the poor—invite them!

Jesus summarized the law when he told us to love God with all our heart and mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In other words, love your neighbor without distinguishing as to whether or not you'd prefer them to be your neighbor or not. That's not the point—love them anyway. Love your neighbors whoever they are and no matter how unnatural or uncomfortable it makes you feel. Especially then, love them.

Some of the more memorable experiences I have had in ministry have come in the form of encounters over the years with certain individuals who have wandered into worship services and even in some instances, joined the churches where I've been the pastor. The people I'm thinking about have been some of the most interesting, colorful and complicated characters you can imagine. The other day I made a list of all the ones I could remember. Everyone I listed was poor. Almost to a person, each one had some

form of mental illness. When it came to family, most of them were essentially alone in the world. And all of them had known great sadness and adversity in their lives.

All of them, at some point, had been discussed by me and my clergy colleagues as to how best to handle them and accommodate them in the church so they felt welcomed there. To the best of my recollection, only one of the individuals on my list ever turned in a pledge card, and it was a pledge for one dollar for the entire year. He also checked the box requesting weekly offering envelopes.

But you know, as I compiled that list of those special people who have come into my life, the length of the list surprised me. And in thinking about them, picturing their faces and recalling some of my encounters with them, both funny and tragic, caught me off guard emotionally and caused me to weep—not merely out of sympathy for them, but also in recognition of the great gift they have been to me. Don't get me wrong, their presence didn't always seem like a gift. But I realized that I've had the honor and privilege of baptizing and burying some of them. And that the congregations I've served were better places because of the welcome they extended to the folks on my list, and that I am a perhaps a better pastor for having known them in all their complexity and challenge.

One of the great Christian liturgical traditions we have is when the casket is actually present at the church for a funeral. It's the covering of the casket with a white funeral pall. In addition to signifying that the one who is deceased has had their baptism made complete, and that they are united with Christ in his death and resurrection—in addition to all of that, the white funeral pall also has a way of covering up the casket in terms of being able to distinguish between an expensive mahogany casket or a crude pine box. In God's eyes, there is no distinguishing between anyone—between who is rich and who is poor, who is deserving and who isn't, who is acceptable in the eyes of God and who isn't.

There is a saying of Buddha that goes like this, “In the sky, there is no distinction of east and west; people create distinctions out of their own minds and then believe them to be true.”

People of God, according to scripture, taking care of the poor isn't an act of voluntary benevolence. Rather, the poor are entitled and the rich are required to help them. It's that simple. There can be no partiality—no distinctions made between which child of God is more valuable than the other. And I am absolutely convinced that as a church, there is nothing we can do that is more pleasing to God than finding ways to welcome everyone, to help the poor and to fight the injustices that have made them poor in the first place and that continue to keep them that way.

Like it's true for individuals, it is also true for churches, for businesses and for countries, that to whom much has been given much is required. That too, can be found in your Bible.

Amen.

