

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost: September 9, 2012

Live Faithfully . . .

James 2:1-10 (11-13) 14-17

David Augsburger in *Dissident Discipleship* makes a comment that has intrigued me about what being radically attached to Jesus entails:

“Being radically attached to Jesus is not simply believing something about Jesus, or even believing in Jesus, it is believing Jesus and believing what Jesus believed.”

To live out the Jesus way of life is to live believing him

– to not only hear what he says

– but to accept what he says as foundational, as truth, as the manner in which we seek to live our lives.

I think James is driving at the same thing here when he talks about favoritism, the rich, the poor,

– what does it mean to live as a believer of Jesus

– as a follower who is faithful to Jesus;

What does it mean not merely to have faith in God, **but to show we live by faith in God?**

Simply, it is seeing and responding to people the way God sees and responds to people.

Faith is not only something we believe – but more importantly, faith is what we do, how we live

– living lives which express what matters to God

– rather than only what matters to us.

James’ admonition – is more than merely not showing favoritism, showing partiality to the rich or exhibiting bad manners to the poor.

In warning against showing favoritism to the wealthy (the powerful, the connected, the beautiful, etc.) it is a warning to not live in ways **which we think benefits us,**

Rather, we are to live being faithful to Jesus.

As mentioned last week, living a practical Christian faith as a follower of Jesus is about setting aside our own agendas in order to be open to embrace others.

Rather than “using” people for the sake of our agendas, we make space for what God is planting and cultivating within us as we relate to others.

We are faithful to the way of Jesus, when Jesus’ vision and agenda for ministry becomes our vision and agenda for engaging whomever God brings into our lives.

So, when we show favoritism, we show partiality to one over another;

We give the best of ourselves to one and the least of ourselves to another.

Through favoritism, we express significance to one and humiliate others.

Favoritism is actually more about ourselves than it is about another
– **we are trying to gain something for ourselves by showing favoritism**
– be it wealth, honor, dependency, or indispensability.

Most of us have been on one end or the other of the showing of favoritism – one causes us to think more highly of ourselves than we ought and the other causes us to think less of ourselves than we ought.

On both ends of favoritism,
– something is diminished in us when that happens.

Favoritism is a power that oppresses and binds those who are both, highly favored or not favored at all.

One makes us beholden to another, the other makes us long for such recognition.

We think, by and large as North Americans, it is who we know with power or wealth, that gets us ahead or gets us what we want.

But showing favoritism does not guarantee us anything.

When things get tough, or things do not go the way the rich and powerful want them to go, it is the wealthy, the powerful who will drag us into court – to right the wrong against them.

No, James says, showing favoritism does not bring about the purposes of God.

Treat everyone fairly, treat everyone as equals
– in fact, those who are marginalized and downtrodden require more attention
– attention which involves access to justice, to daily needs, to resources, so that they are treated equally and fairly.

The practical way that James expresses this is: don't show favoritism to the wealthy, but give priority to those who touch the heart of God – the poor among us.

But he is saying more than this.

The setting for this warning could either be a worship setting (as has often been assumed) or it is a courtroom setting.

If **a worship setting**, it may seem to be merely a case of bad manners, a lack of showing respect as we fawn upon the rich and powerful and neglect to give places of honor to the poor and marginalized.

But the situation is more dire if the setting is within **a courtroom**. “The poor have come . . . to seek justice, and their chances of gaining a fair trial are dim, given the favoritism that is rife. So, [in this case], the reception of the poor is not simply a case of bad manners; it is a policy of downright evil, as v. 4 openly declares” (Martin, *James*, 73).

In essence,

- just don't give some more respect and others less,
- but take the time, make the space,
- for those God is bringing / planting into our lives
- in the same way that Jesus made space, not only for us, but also for those very different from us.

James in making this even more practical, says, “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?”

James is talking about more than giving support to ministries such as PADS, or Food pantries
– to merely assuage our guilt for not helping the poor enough so we can get on with our lives
– rather, I think he is saying, when we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread (daily clothing, daily shelter),” we are not to be praying just about ourselves – we are to realize that this petition is a prayer that all pray
– we are not the only ones praying this.

What do we do then when we hear others praying this things?
– especially when we realize that our praying this in many of our contexts is not really praying at all
– we just don’t worry about not having our daily bread
– **yet, for others it is a prayer because they do not know where their daily bread will come from.**

It is not just about showing favoritism to the rich and powerful, it is also an ironic jab at us
– to not show favoritism to ourselves – we who are well off and well fed
– over against those in need, the poor and marginalized, the weak and disenfranchised.

The poor are the ones God sees, the ones God wants us to see
– **the ones we have a hard time seeing when we are concerned about ourselves first.**

There is a bit of tongue and cheekiness in James here – which we will see more next week.

Listen to the irony he expresses:

“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, ‘You shall not commit adultery, also said, ‘You shall not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.”

In our mind the lesser sin is committing adultery – “at least I am not a murderer.”

But here the murderer is saying, “at least I am not an adulterer.”

What helps explain the irony is that “murder is frequently associated with discriminating against the poor, which is a failure to love one’s neighbor”

– Jesus in the Sermon on Mount says “calling one a fool is tantamount to murder.” (cf. Matthew 5:21ff)

Here neglecting the poor is more than showing partiality, it can be regarded as a “hate crime” – i.e., murder.

Just because one prides themselves of being free from fleshly sins (e.g. adultery) this does not free us from being guilty of sin when we commit showing favoritism (which may seem as a lesser sin)

– in fact, favoritism is a masked form of hate

– in showing favoritism we are practicing murder (cf. Martin, *James*, 70)

The twist, the jab, I think James wants us to feel is this:

Yes, we may find ways of not showing favoritism to others – feeling positive about siding with the poor;

Yet, if we covet comfort and justice **for ourselves** more than we do for others

– we show favoritism to ourselves

– are we not then just as guilty of siding with the rich and powerful over against the poor?

Practical faith again is about setting aside our own agendas and our penchant for taking care of ourselves first.

In so doing, we are open to what God is planting in us.

Our faith then is more than words

– **it shows itself in deeds**

– **deeds that do not show favoritism to either others or ourselves**

– **but instead, advocates and walks with those whom God wants us to notice, wants us to engage.**

What do you think?

I know what James has to say, calls me to reassess my own life.