

“An Active Faith”
James 2:1-17
7.11.21
Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
Pollocksville Presbyterian Church
Sermon #106

James 2:1-17 Common English Bible (CEB)

2 My brothers and sisters, when you show favoritism you deny the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory. ² Imagine two people coming into your meeting. One has a gold ring and fine clothes, while the other is poor, dressed in filthy rags. ³ Then suppose that you were to take special notice of the one wearing fine clothes, saying, “Here’s an excellent place. Sit here.” But to the poor person you say, “Stand over there”; or, “Here, sit at my feet.” ⁴ Wouldn’t you have shown favoritism among yourselves and become evil-minded judges?

⁵ My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Hasn’t God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn’t

God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Don't the wealthy make life difficult for you? Aren't they the ones who drag you into court? ⁷ Aren't they the ones who insult the good name spoken over you at your baptism?

⁸ You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, *Love your neighbor as yourself.* ⁹ But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law you are exposed as a lawbreaker. ¹⁰ Anyone who tries to keep all of the Law but fails at one point is guilty of failing to keep all of it. ¹¹ The one who said, *Don't commit adultery,* also said, *Don't commit murder.* So if you don't commit adultery but do commit murder, you are a lawbreaker. ¹² In every way, then, speak and act as people who will be judged

by the law of freedom. ¹³ There will be no mercy in judgment for anyone who hasn't shown mercy. Mercy overrules judgment.

¹⁴ My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? ¹⁵ Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. ¹⁶ What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks Be to God.**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last week, we were in James 1:17-27. This epistle is a surviving piece of history that represents the time when Jewish Christianity was the norm. Distinct from Pauline Christianity, it is concerned about following the Law. Although, it is certainly not works righteousness....being saved because of your works. These Jewish Christians, after all, were living in a land full of Jews who were not Christians. So, they had to be mindful of their practices not only as Christians, but also as Jews.

James places an emphasis on Jesus as Teacher. That is, James is concerned with Jesus' teachings. And at the heart of this epistle,

the question is “Why do Christians call Jesus LORD, yet do not do what he calls them to do?”

We also read last week that every good gift comes from God. God is indeed the Father and Creator of all that is. God does not change. And by God’s Word, planted deep inside of us, we are birthed. Our souls are like a garden. And while God is the Master Gardener, we have a responsibility to tend to it. That is, we not only listen to the Word, but we do what the Word tells us!

And now, here we are in chapter 2. This passage expands upon last week’s scripture. We read in James 2:11 that God is the Lawgiver: Do not commit adultery or murder. And yet, even while God is the Lawgiver, commentators on James state that God’s law, as noted in James 2:12, liberates.

But, the most obvious connecting thread between chapters 1 and 2 is that loving our neighbor is a big part of being doers of the word.

What does that look like?

Well, I don't know about you, but I'm used to hanging around people who run in similar circles as I do. Honestly, I'm certain that's what most of us do. There's nothing inherently wrong with it.....it's just the way it goes. I have friends who are typically middle class, college educated, white, and have some affinity to music. While that's not the way all my friends are, it's most of them for sure. As human beings, we are used to being around people like us and we tend to gravitate toward people who look, act, dress, or think like us.

In James' community, there is a bigger issue. They are showing favoritism to people who not only look like them, but are from a

higher socio-economic status. This community James is addressing knows who has the deep pockets and they are partial to them. Whereas, those who don't have as much or nothing at all are ignored or cast aside.

And you know what, it can get disorienting being around people who aren't like we are. Who dress differently, come from lower classes in society, or have different skin tones than we do. It can get even more disorienting if a person, who is used to being in the majority, is suddenly in the minority in a room full of people. Quite frankly, it's disorienting when it's a simple conversation between two people from various backgrounds who are trying to understand each other.

And that's what James is getting at! James is concerned with his community's public worship of God. But, they are casting aside

those who are a little.....strange. Different. Odd. Especially if they are poor.

Y'all, reading this passage over the week....something hit me square in the face. As James argues that God is not concerned with class distinctions, he claims that God does have preference to and for the marginalized. I meditated on that for some time. And it all started with James' reference to the Beatitudes found in Matthew. As James 2:5-6 says:

⁵ My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Hasn't God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn't God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him?

God is not concerned with class distinctions. God is concerned, however, with the oppressed and that is why God delivered the

Hebrews from Egypt. God is not concerned with only men in power, but God is concerned about women being called to lead, such as Deborah the Judge who led the Israelites to victory from the oppressive thumb of King Jabin of the Canaanites. God is not concerned about the status quo, but God is concerned about the shepherders and fig farmers who turn out to be prophets like Amos who preach to the evil kingdoms that “justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”! And God is certainly not concerned with earthly empires, but instead blesses the womb of an unwed, teenaged, Middle Eastern mother with a son, born in a manger, who preached Good News to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, who was killed at the hands of the Roman State, but was raised by God to defeat the powers of sin and death!

God is not concerned with class distinctions. But God is concerned with how we, as followers of Christ, are to act mercifully toward our neighbors.

Earlier this year, the Religion News Service had an article regarding the housing crisis, especially in Los Angeles.¹ In L.A. County alone, there are over 66,000 people who are experiencing homelessness right now. There's little affordable housing where people can not only afford a place to live AND feel safe, too. Churches in the area are noticing. These congregations are mainly Black and Latinx. Many of these parishes are considered "land rich and cash poor".² These congregations are not as big as they once were, but they sit on plenty of land. Many sell their properties to developers who take advantage of them. That is, offer them money way under the market value and then build extravagant housing

¹<https://pres-outlook.org/2021/03/in-southern-california-black-churches-are-using-their-land-to-build-housing-for-homeless-people/>

² *ibid.*

meant to keep out those who cannot afford it. But, what can be done?

The Rev. John Cager, pastor of Ward African Methodist Episcopal Church in South L.A., helped create the Faith Community Coalition. This coalition is designed to help pastors and their churches who are facing declining revenue and are forced to sell part of their properties. It gives these congregations a way to give them a healthy stream of revenue and possibly contribute to the fight against homelessness. Currently, out of the 200 congregations involved in this coalition, forty are actively seeking ways to use developers to build affordable housing. Building “housing for those who are unhoused.”³

³ ibid.

Rev. Cager continues in the article that the coalition is intentional in its ministry of development and housing because they trust in the Good News of Jesus Christ.⁴ He says:

*We have a heart for serving the least, the lost, the left out and the left behind. So it is the heart of our churches and our church members that we have an eye for the unhoused and we have an eye for seniors, for transition-aged youth. Those who have the most issues finding a safe secure housing.*⁵

This is a way for churches to reimagine how to do ministry. For those who are trying to discern how to continue to live in their communities, this helps address a huge national crisis by transforming lives one housing unit at a time and revitalizing communities. And even for some congregations, it means completely razing their properties and downsizing because a

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

sanctuary that is meant for 500 people may not continue to be sustainable.

This story is just an example of what churches around our nation and world are doing. Pollocksville Presbyterian has a long history of demonstrating an active faith when the alternative could have prevailed. But, what's next for this congregation? It's easy to simply wring our hands, fret about the future, and give up. It's also hard to live an active faith. In fact, it takes a lifetime and we will still never master it. Yet, we are called to live out an active faith.

The Spirit is pulling at us and possibly inflicting us with a bit of unsettledness. What's next? Well, I don't know the answer to that. I do know that it will take a lot of discernment, like our siblings in Los Angeles have been doing. It's going to take a lot of risk. It's going to take a lot of time.

Siblings in Christ, trust this Good News!

In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.