

## Favoritism

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA at Oxford High School, on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 15, 1991. Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9; Psalm 125; James 2:1-5, 8-10, 14-17; Mark 8:27-38.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN**

I want to draw your attention to our Epistle lesson. A few moments ago we heard a passage which began this way: "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" James tells a short story about a rich person and a poor person who visited a Christian worship service. The rich visitor was given a prominent seat up front, while the poor visitor was made to sit on the floor.

Now I want you to try to keep in mind what James wrote as I tell you another story. I'm thinking of a church in Philadelphia where I served as an intern when I was in seminary. On the session there were several very wealthy men and woman. But on that same session were also a janitor in a down-town office building and a woman who cleaned the homes of rich people. Together they served on the session, both the rich and the poor.

There was something else interesting about that church. They actively sought to evangelize everybody in the neighborhood, rich, poor, and in between. Their minister, the Rev. Richard Armstrong, trained men and women to go from door to door and share their faith. They called themselves *Ambassadors for Christ*. They met every Tuesday evening for a time of prayer, and to go over their list of new people in the community. They'd go out, two by two, and call on their prospects. Two hours later

they'd meet back at the church to talk about their visits.

Whenever someone new moved into the neighborhood it was very likely that two of those *Ambassadors for Christ* would show up at the door, often with coffee and donuts, to welcome them to the community. It wasn't just a social visit though. They'd always bear witness to their faith in Christ. But it wasn't a high-pressured affair. They never put people on the spot. They'd always invite these people to come and see what the Lord was doing at the Oak Lane Presbyterian Church.

In so many churches, the middle-income families are the objects of evangelistic efforts while poor people are simply objects of charity and hand-outs. <sup>(repeat)</sup> Most church have a tendency to show partiality to young couples with children but ignore the elderly or the single or the divorced or the poor. We have social ministries for the poor, and evangelistic ministries to the middle income families.

But the Oak Lane church made an active attempt to reach out to all without showing partiality to the rich or ignoring the poor. I think of an elderly Jewish man in failing health who lived in a small one room apartment, without a relative, without a friend in the world. He lived as a recluse until visited one evening by two *Ambassadors for Christ* from the Oak Lane church.

He wasn't a very desirable recruit. He had no children for the Sunday school. He was a widow. He was elderly. He could contribute very little

financially to the church. And he had B.O. There's a great temptation to ignore people like this... to say, "Well, he wouldn't fit in very well in our church."

But these *Ambassadors for Christ* from the Oak Lane church really believed in "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ". They really believed that "God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that God has promised to those who love him".

They got to know this old Jewish man with his raggedy clothes and poor body hygiene. They set up a schedule by which he was regularly visited at least once a week. When he got cancer of the throat, members of the church took him to the doctors and then to radiation treatment. They brought him meals when he got home. Members of the church bathed him and helped to feed him... this poor old dieing man who had nothing financially to give to the church... who couldn't add anything to the church's prestige.

And slowly this poor man began to ask questions of his new friends. "What motivates you people to come and look after me week after week?" At first he thought they were just do-gooders. Maybe they thought they were adding up brownie points with God. But they denied it. They laughed... deep laughter that welled up from within. They didn't believe what they were doing was earning them any merit at all. They said they actually were growing to like him... they even spoke of their love for him. They said they wanted to visit him because a Palestinian Jew had visited them in their

time of need; had befriended them, had washed them, had brought them food and drink, had even died for them.

One day this poor old man in his shabby clothes asked if he could come to church? He'd never been to a Christian worship service before. Two deacons picked him up. By then he was confined to a wheel-chair. They rolled him up front where he could hear and see well. People came up to him afterwards and greeted him with smiles. They were glad to have him there. So he kept on coming, week after week.

At first he didn't understand much of anything. What were they singing?

"Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost.

As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end."

What did that mean?

He didn't know the Apostles' Creed. He'd just follow along in the hymnal trying to make sense of it.

He listened to the sermons. Everything seemed to focus on Jesus. He heard about Jesus... how he came into this world as the child of an unwed mother... how he had no place to lay his head... how he touched untouchables and ate and drank with sinners and claimed to forgive sins. He heard about how one of his friends betrayed him, how he was unjustly found guilty, and died naked on a cross between two thieves.

He heard also about how this dead Jew came back to life- not simply survived death, but triumphed over death. And he began to believe it. Not all

at once, not suddenly, but slowly and truly. And as he read the Bible that was given to him he sensed that the One of whom it spoke, was present and speaking to him through that book.

Finally, he came to the place in his life where he wanted to confess his faith in Christ as Lord and Savior... confess his sin and need of a savior... confess his desire to follow Jesus to his life's end. Rev. Armstrong reviewed with him the Gospel message, he met with the session and was received into the church by profession of faith in Jesus Christ. He couldn't respond audibly to the questions because the throat cancer had taken his voice but he could shake his head and he could smile a big wide smile. And then he was baptized, sitting there in his wheel-chair in his old clothes and received the Sacrament of Holy Communion for the first time in his life. There wasn't a dry eye in the sanctuary that morning.

When this poor man died his funeral was held in the sanctuary of the Oak Lane church. He had no known relatives in this world, but the sanctuary was filled with brothers and sisters in Christ who were there to bear witness to the resurrection and the life everlasting.

This story is true. It's true because men and women really believed in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. They really believed that God has 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. They had a faith that worked. They expressed their faith through their works. Faith, by itself, if it has no

works, is dead. It won't save you.

But someone says, "I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I trust in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and rest alone in him for my salvation." James asks, "Show me your faith. Show that you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ."

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can that kind of 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." *The vision of our new church*

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Let us pray: Almighty and most merciful God, we remember before you all poor and neglected persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: The homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken <sup>in body or</sup> spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. <sup>Help us to turn them</sup> <sup>towards</sup> Jesus Christ that they might know <sup>thy</sup> love, grace and fellowship. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor. Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen