

Favoritism Forbidden

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary time, September 7, 1997: Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37.

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

Maybe you've heard the story of the old washer woman who for years attended the First Presbyterian Church. Everybody who was anybody in town went to the First Presbyterian Church. The old washer woman repeatedly attempted to join the church but she was continually put off by the elders who complained that she didn't fit and would be more comfortable in another church on the other side of the railroad tracks. After years of trying to join the woman prayed. "Dear Lord, how can I get those good people at the First Presbyterian Church to let me in. I know I'm not wealthy, but I believe I can contribute something to that church." And the Lord Jesus Christ himself answered her. "I know just how you feel. I've been trying to get into that church a lot longer than you have. We'll just have to keep trying."

I thought of that apocryphal story as I read our Scripture lesson from the letter of James.

"My brothers and sisters", he writes,

"do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts."

My first thought on reading that passage is to say that God is a God of equality and that we as Christians should be people of equality. But on second thought I realize this passage isn't directed to the same class of people that I usually preach to on Sunday morning because the text goes on to say, "Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?" Well, the rich don't oppress us or drag most of us into court. We're fairly well-to-do. In other words, the congregation to which James is preaching is a poor congregation unlike ours. And when a rich person came into their sanctuary with nice clothes and jewelry they don't recognize an equal. They're paying deference to a superior and James says that the Gospel frees them from having to do that. "You poor people don't have to defer to the rich," he says.

Our congregation, however, unlike James' congregation, is not a poor congregation. We're a middle-class congregation. We're relatively well off, at least most of us are. So we need to hear what James says a little differently than his original readers. We need to *overhear* what James says to his poor congregation. In other words, think of it this way. Christmas is less than a week away and the deacons of ~~First~~ ^{Oxford} Presbyterian Church are down in the fellowship hall putting together Christmas baskets for poor people on the other side of the tracks. We're doing this because we're Christians. The Lord has blessed us and we want to share our blessings with the less fortunate. And we're right to do so. While we're putting together the Christmas baskets we're talking. Someone says, "You know, last year, a lot of people we delivered baskets to didn't seem to appreciate what we're doing."

Meanwhile brother James is preaching to his poor congregation over there on the other side of town. He's saying, "It's Christmas time again and it won't be long before the Presbyterians are over here with their Christmas baskets. And what are you going to do when they come? Are you going to bow and scrape and act as if this is the most magnificent thing that's ever happened? You don't have to do that. These are the same people who pay you to polish their silverware and then accuse you of stealing it." And as we arrive in our van with our Christmas baskets, we overhear brother James preaching. It hits us. And it hits us in a different way because of the way we hear it. It changes us. It changes our attitude toward the poor. It makes us think of how we can be patronizing to poor people. And how we can expect them to defer to us. It helps us to realize that we need to give for our own spiritual welfare every bit as much as poor people need to receive for their physical welfare (but don't give money to poor people when they ask because that may not be the best way to help them).

James goes on to say, "You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

I think of a story told by Alan Paton, in his novel *Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful*. The story is based on a real historical event that took place in the early days of apartheid in South

Africa, following World War II. As you know, *apartheid* is an Afrikaner word that means *apartness*, a philosophy which required Blacks, Whites, and Coloreds to live and worship separately. In the story, Judge Olivier, an Afrikaner Judge, that is, a White judge of Dutch ancestry, responds to the urgent invitation of a black pastor to visit his church, the Holy Church of Zion. The white judge knows that simply by worshipping in a Black church he risks destroying his career but he wants to show the black congregation that not all white people support the evil system of apartheid.

The invitation is for Maundy Thursday. Before the communion service, the church observed the ritual of foot washing. Remember that on the first Maundy Thursday, in the Upper Room, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples as an example for us to follow. So the judge found himself paired off with a woman, a black woman, named Martha Fortuin. Now Martha had worked as a servant in his house for more than thirty years. For thirty years this poor woman had gotten up early and gone to the judge's house. She swept and vacuumed. She washed his clothes. She dusted. She ironed. She polished his silver. She scrubbed the bathrooms. She took out his garbage. For over thirty years she served him faithfully. And the worshippers saw that the judge and his servant were paired up and they gasped. This is inappropriate. It's not appropriate, it's not even legal, for a White man, a judge, an Afrikaner, to wash the feet of a Black person, let alone his servant.

At that point, Paton tells us that Judge Olivier got down on his knees before Martha and (I quote): 'he took both her feet in his hands with gentleness, for they were no doubt tired with much serving, and he kissed them both. Then Martha Fortuin and many others in the Holy Church of Zion fell a-weeping.' Judge Olivier, by that simple action, demonstrated his faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. His faith was made visible by his works. This incident was picked up by some of the leading American and English newspapers and Judge Olivier's career came to an end.

Christ forbids us not only *to show* favoritism but also *to expect* it. The poor need not scrape and grovel before us more well-to-do people. We should not expect to receive favorable

treatment because we're of a higher social class or because we're better educated than others. Nor is there any reason for us to feel slighted if we're not shown favoritism. We are to give honor and respect to all, high and low, rich and poor. But we aren't to become disgruntled when we don't receive honor and respect. Christians bear powerful witness to our glorious Lord Jesus Christ when we refuse to buy into the world's value system which favors us rich people over the poor, the thin over the overweight, the educated over the uneducated, the beautiful and flashy over the plain, the White Anglo Saxon over the Hispanic.

In one of Peter Devries novels, *Comfort Me With Apples*, the main character is a man named Chick Swallow. Swallow is a critic of conventional church life. As Swallow watches well dressed worshippers hurrying towards church on a Sunday morning, he says, "There but for the grace of God go I." This feeling seems to be shared by many people in our culture. Too many people who are looking for the grace of God fear that by identifying with a local church they're more likely to find a bunch of like minded people who like to meet with people just like themselves.

Christ calls us to much higher standards. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if we say we have faith but do not have works? Can (that kind of) faith save us?" "Faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Sources:

The insight about hearing the passage from the stand point of the poor when we are rich comes from a tape by Tom Long (I.O.T. Lecture I: A Fresh Look at Creating the Sermon)

The story about Alan Paton comes from Stephen E. Fowl & L. Gregory Jones, in *Reading in Communion: Scripture & Ethics in Christian Life*. So also does the quote by Peter Devries.