

This morning we're reading from the letter of James. James isn't the most popular of books in the Bible. There's not much poetry or passion. It doesn't have the profound theology of Romans. The letter of James is much more down-to-earth and full of practical, common-sense wisdom. The goal of the letter is to engage us in humble service to our neighbors in need. This letter is written to a dispersed- a scattered people. James tells it like it is; he cuts to the heart of the matter. For James the marks of true religion are integrity of speech and concern for the weak and vulnerable. Today we look at the latter. Before turning to God's word for us this day, first, let us pray. **PRAY.**

READ. James 2:1-13

When he was a student, the famous Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, considered becoming a Christian. He read the Gospels and was moved by them. It seemed to him that Christianity offered a solution to the caste system that plagued the people of India. One Sunday, he went to a local church. He had decided to see the pastor and ask for instruction on the way of salvation. But when he entered the church, which consisted of all white people, the ushers refused to give him a seat. They told him to go and worship with his own people. He left and never went back. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu." (from "Our Daily Bread," Feb. 1979)

"My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" (2:1). What if your reaction to this question today? In only one of his two mentions of Jesus in the entire letter, James offers an example of blatant favoritism and how this

discrimination flies right in the very face of what it means to follow Jesus. His is an example with which many of us can identify. Some have called these first few verses the parable of the prejudiced usher. Whether it be favoritism of the rich over the poor or just plain judgment by appearance or labels, most of us have failed to live by our Christian convictions. We're all hypocrites. "How do we show favoritism or dishonor the poor? What do our words and actions or void of actions say about us as followers of Christ?"

On the front of our bulletin are the words, "You are God's child, and you are welcome in this place." This is good news until you realize that this means that everyone is God's child and everyone is welcome. James says, "You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to scripture, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors" (James 2:8-9). For James, loving your neighbor as yourself is the central teaching of the faith. We've all heard this before...and yet, we forget. Or worse...we ignore God's commandment to love. Or even worse...we fail to remember one's humanity and dignity. We show partiality in our daily lives and therefore, we sin.

Twenty plus years ago, I worked at the Women's Prison in Atlanta as a chaplain. My job was to provide pastoral and spiritual care for those incarcerated as well as for the staff. There were files kept on each prisoner. Inside those files one could read about what each woman had done or

allegedly done. We were encouraged, as staff, to look at these files. Many times, after reading files, I would not visit certain women because I wasn't sure I could look them in the eyes after reading their file. So...I visited the check fraud and embezzlement prisoners and stayed away from the alleged child abusers and murderers. I was overwhelmed. My colleague, Brenda, asked me one day what I was doing. I told her, and she said something I'll never forget. She said, "Jennifer, just show up and let God do the rest. Don't read those files. They get in the way of you providing pastoral care. When you read them, you judge or become afraid instead of just showing up and listening to these women. If they lie to you, so what! All they have is their stories in here, so show up and listen- no background info is needed." I did what Brenda said and at first, I felt incomplete- I didn't know what I needed to know to visit because I hadn't read a file. But then...as I began to just show up and listen and trust God in the process, which wasn't easy...I didn't worry as much about what they had done (ok, sometimes I was still curious). But I was free to hear the needs of these women, to get to know them and to pray with and for them. Whose files do you read? What judgements keep you from being present for someone in need?

James accuses those who have shown favoritism of being judges with evil thoughts. Some of us find it's easier to judge others than it is to judge ourselves. And some of us are really hard on ourselves. Judging starts small and then snowballs into bigger things. Most of us don't realize we're showing favoritism or judging until it becomes a way of being. James' verbs here are imperatives. He commands those gathered to, "Speak and act as

those who are to be judged by the law of liberty” (James 2:12)- the “law of love.” How can the law of love represent freedom? Maybe the law of love is one of freedom because it allows for authentic human interaction that does not oppress but rather liberates. This freedom found within the law of love encourages participating and risk-taking which brings about new possibilities and makes space for mercy. God’s love, forgiveness and acceptance, shown to us in Jesus Christ, makes possible within us loving God and our neighbors as ourselves. Because God first loved us, we’re free to love others and ourselves. Because God first forgave us, we don’t have to put others down to build ourselves up. Because God first accepted us, we can show up and participate in the kingdom of God here on earth, participating in the law of love- trying to meet others just as they are, where they are.

The polar opposite of favoritism is mercy. God’s measure is one of mercy, not condemnation. Yet, James makes it clear that “judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy” (2:13a). Sit with the practical application of these words for a moment. Whoa! Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy. God in Christ shows mercy even when we don’t deserve it. There couldn’t be a more profound image of God’s mercy than the cross. Talk about making space for mercy? The cross is a powerful reminder not only of the Author of our Salvation, the Perfector of our Faith, Jesus Christ, but also of what God’s tender mercy- what others may judge as less than or unworthy, reveals. Making space for mercy in the midst of our judgment is not easy. Following Jesus

isn't easy either. The Gospel demands a lot of us. We have to be accountable for our words and actions- not only in worship but out in the world.

Did you know that on any given night in America, nearly half a million people sit in jail before trial, mainly because they can't afford bail? The money bail crisis hits every corner of the U.S., from the largest cities to the smallest towns. This is where the Bail Project comes in. The Bail Project not only makes bail but it also makes space for mercy by "restoring the presumption of innocence, reuniting families, and challenging a system that criminalizes race and poverty one person at a time. They're on a mission to end cash bail and create a more just, equitable, and humane pretrial system" (www.bailproject.org/mission). "Nearly 500,000 individuals, companies, and foundations power The Bail Project with contributions of all sizes and their belief that rights should never be for sale and freedom should be free. Thanks to generous donations, they can provide free bail assistance to thousands of low-income people every year. Once free, they support them in coming back to court and they work with local partners to provide wrap-around services if needed. Because bail is returned at the end of a case, donations to the Revolving Bail Fund can be recycled and reused to pay bail two to three times per year, maximizing the impact of every dollar" (www.bailproject.org). The Bail Project is coming to Greenville, and they're currently hiring for two "bail disruptors." What a great job title!

"While the American image of justice is a blindfolded woman holding

balance scales, the biblical image is of a God who sees everything and sets things right. God is not impartial; God chooses the weak and establishes justice. As a church, we're called to let the light of Christ disclose genuine worth. In the economy of God's grace, the very ones for whom the world has little regard have become the guests of honor in the household of God" (Thomas G. Long, *Christian Century*, 2009). In our baptisms, we're all marked and claimed- whether rich or poor- as the royal children of God. Knowing that, how do we make space for mercy here at Triune Mercy Center and beyond these walls? How do we live out those words on the front of our bulletin daily?

If we say we're followers of Christ, what do we do with our judgment? It doesn't matter if you're poor or wealthy, we all judge. So how can we begin making space for God's mercy? Parker Palmer, an educator and a Quaker, speaks of a phrase to say in your mind when you find yourself beginning to judge or feel critical or be unkind to your neighbor. **He invites people to "turn to wonder."** I **wonder** what brought her to this belief or opinion? I **wonder** what led to him living on the streets? I **wonder** what their story is to make this person so angry? I **wonder** what makes me so uncomfortable to share a meal with someone different? Simply notice when you're feeling judgmental, name the judgment and turn to wonder. By noticing and naming our judgments, we slowly make a shift from judgment to wonder- thus, making space for mercy. Once we turn to wonder...maybe we'll notice the wideness of God's mercy- in ourselves and in others? Maybe we'll notice that God is the ultimate judge and *God's*

mercy is greater than our sins (Henri Nouwen)? James writes, “mercy triumphs over judgment.” Or as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it in *The Message*, “Kind mercy wins over harsh judgment anytime.” Our words and actions are a powerful witness to our faith in Jesus Christ and what it looks like to follow him. Turn to your neighbor and say, “You are God’s child, and you are welcome in this place.” Now go out and live those words in faith, but first let us be fed at Christ’s crowded table, where there is always space for mercy. Amen.