

09/05/21

The Best Seat in the House

15th S. a. Pentecost 10:00 AM

James 2:1-10,14-18

ILC/FELC/ZLC

Pastor Huber

It's sure great to have generous church members...especially when they own "**season tickets**" but can't attend the events. *"Hey, Pastor Tim! We're out of town this week and figure you probably have plenty of free time since you only work on Sunday mornings, SO...do you want to go to the Kings' game?"* (Swallowing my pride) *"Why, yes, I DO!"* says I...as an usher escorts us to seats so close to the action you can get splattered by the players' **sweat** as they run down court. And did you know if you're in the **reserved seat** section, the ushers actually take your order and **SERVE** you your over-priced nachos and beer?

"Hey, Pastor, we've made alternative plans, and since we hear you have a lot of time on your hands, would you like to go to the Bernadette Peters one-woman show at the Gallo Center?" *"Why, yes, I would!"* as we're escorted to seats **dead center**, just three rows back from Bernadette's Peters' lovely feet. But it gets even **better** as I glance over my shoulder, two rows in back and to our left, and see the great Carol Channing sitting there! Ahhh! The perks and pleasures of "**reserved seating**"! It makes you forget you got those seats for **FREE** and actually only deserve to sit with the **rest** of the "hoi polloi" in the **cheap seats**!

In our text from the Epistle for this morning, the Apostle James (Jesus' half-brother) starts out with a "what if" story that **ALSO** presents us with a "**seating quandary**" illustrating a very clear statement that "favoritism" or "partiality" is totally incompatible with the Christian faith. And you know it **already** had to be a problem there, because the construction of the Greek verb used here isn't "**DONT**" but rather "**STOP**" showing favoritism.

So, the Apostles' story begins with two guys arriving late for church...but for obviously **different reasons**. One is late because he **wants** to be "**seen by men**", so he's "dressed to the nines" to show how **important** he is as he makes his entrance. He's got a flashy **gold ring** on his finger, and we're told his expensive **ROBE** (one of the ultimate signs of wealth

back then) was “shiney”. He wasn’t there to **worship** but to **BE** worshipped by literally “**dazzling**” others with his riches.

The **OTHER** man **also** arrives late, but it’s because he **doesn't** want to be “seen by men”! He just wants to surreptitiously slip in to worship and then out again. Why? Because he’s **poor** and dressed in a **filthy** robe...in fact, it’s the word used in the Revelation 22:11 to mean **morally** filthy! So, how the does the church usher greet the **rich** man? “*Follow me up to the “good” seating*” (literally, the “**elevated**” seats) the **reserved** section. But to the **poor** man? “*You just **stand** here or sit on the **floor**, fella!*”

In modern lingo, these guys have just been “**profiled**”, which doesn’t necessarily have to be **bad**...in **theory**. (In fact, I’m told that a certain amount of **profiling** has spared our nation from a **number** of terrorist attacks!) But notice in the story what that church usher **DID** with this profiling. He played “**favorites**”! His **preference** for **rich** over **poor** became a **prejudice** that developed into a **pre-judgment** that resulted in an **evil action** in the eyes of God. In v. 4 James **literally** uses the word **EVIL** to describe what was done here. Now there’s nothing wrong with giving the first guy a **reserved seat** (as long as you do the same to the poor man, as **well**). James is reminding us that such kinds of **discrimination** should have no place among the members of God’s Forever Family that’s designed to be open **equally** to rich, poor, and everybody **in between**! This is why James is so **categorical** here in telling us that showing **favoritism** is totally incompatible with being a Christian who’s supposed to treat others with **equal** love and concern, including both the **poor** and even **slaves** who owned nothing for themselves!

If you know your history, those who argued **against** slavery historically tended to do so from the **Bible**. It’s estimated that **SLAVES** constituted one-third of the Roman Empire’s population! Many of the earliest Christians were **impoverished SLAVES**. And yet, once the gospel and other Biblical teaching **spread** in the church, many slaves became **deacons, elders, and other** church leaders. In fact, they then would have spiritual authority over their own Christian **masters**! This led the church to help bring the kind of transformation into the secular **CULTURE** that the gospel had brought into the ancient **CHURCH**, and yet goes totally against our selfish, sinful nature.

Our **fallenness** makes us want to be a part of not just **any** group, but an **exclusive** group. By definition, every society includes people who **connect**, who **belong** to one another. Yet every society **also** includes people who feel **left out**—the kid who never gets chosen by the **other** kids at recess, whose invitations to **dance** get turned down, or who always get voted off the island **first**. We exclude others because of **pride** or **fear** or **ignorance** or the desire to feel **superior**.

And yet, there will always be things that distinguish, separate—and one could even use the term “**discriminate**”—one person from another. For example, in a month we’ll be flying across the country for my 55th high school reunion. We’ll be sitting in the **CHEAP** seats, but once the plane is underway on almost any **LARGE** airplane, a **curtain** gets drawn to separate the two compartments. Like the veil that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the Holy of Holies in the temple at Jerusalem, it’s **not** to be violated! That curtain is a reminder throughout the flight that some people are **first class** and some of us **aren't!** You’re not even allowed to see what’s going **on** behind the other side of the curtain! And then a voice will come over the intercom telling us in our “Court of the Gentiles” that we are not allowed to use the **facilities** in the **Holy of Holies**, even though there is **one restroom** for **eight people** up **there** and only **two restrooms** for several **hundred** of us on the other side. That curtain stands for a tendency deep inside our fallen human spirit to **exclude**. And within the **act** of exclusion, we divide the world up into “**them**” and “**us**”.

But when it comes to our attitude and relationships within **God’s Family**, —to use James’ own words in the next chapter—“*Brethren, this ought not to be.*” And we in God’s church often try our best **NOT** to let that exclusiveness **BE**...sometimes with **success**, sometimes **not so much**.

It reminds me of the Lutheran pastor who was out **VISITING** one afternoon, inviting people to his little church outside of town. One man said, “*Preacher, I’d **LIKE** to come to your church, but I **can't**. I don't have any nice clothes to wear.*” The pastor said, “*Well, our church isn’t like that, so that’s not really necessary, **BUT** if I arrange to get you some nice clothes, will you come to church?*” “**Yes,**” the man promised, “*I **WILL**.*” So, the pastor made a few phone calls and arranged for the man to receive

a brand-new suit, shirt, tie, and shoes. Then **Sunday** came, but the man didn't show up! On Monday the preacher **called** him: "*We expected to **see** you yesterday. What **happened?***" The man said, "*Well, preacher, I got up Sunday morning, put on my new suit, looked at myself in the mirror and said to myself, 'Man, do I look **sharp** in this new suit! In fact, **NOW** I think I even look good enough to fit in at that fancy **Episcopal** church in town.' So that's where I **went**."* (Well, at least the Anglicans got him!)

James then goes on to say in v. 8ff that some sins like adultery or murder may have greater consequences than others...but **ANY** sin, including **favoritism**, still makes one guilty of breaking **ALL** the law, because it breaks the **ROYAL** Law, in other words, Christ our **KING's** Law, —the one Jesus quoted from Lev. 19:18 when He decreed, "***Love your neighbor as yourself.***" And it's no coincidence that these words in Lev. 19:15 are right before it: "***Do not twist justice in legal matters by favoring the poor or being partial to the rich and powerful. Always judge people fairly.***"

The root of the word "**favoritism**" means to "**lift up somebody's face,**" to **elevate** them. The idea is to judge someone by taking them only at **face value**...a **superficial** evaluation of a person's worth, based on nothing but what appears on the **surface**. We often **do** that with others, **don't** we? But in contrast, Deut.10:17 says, "*The **LORD** your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, Who shows **no partiality.***" The old KJV translates this as "***God is no respecter of persons.***" Of course, that doesn't mean our Heavenly Father doesn't **respect** us! It just means He doesn't play **favorites**. It means He doesn't love you more **OR** less according to the color of your **skin** or the **clothes** you wear or how much **money** you have in the bank or even if you have more degrees than a **thermometer**. But it **DOES** mean He loves **ALL** of us **equally**. Otherwise, He wouldn't have sent His Son to reconcile the **WHOLE WORLD** unto Himself.

Rom. 3:23 says, "***ALL** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" Thus, **ALL** of us deserve the **equal justice** of **HELL!** However, Gal. 3:28 says, "*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor male and female, for you and I **ALL** have been made equally one, solely by*

grace through faith in Christ Jesus.” But is that simply **IT** for us? Or is there something **MORE** that God has saved us **FOR** or saved us to **DO**?

Well, Jesus’ half-brother certainly thinks so in the final section of today’s epistle lesson. He says in v. 14ff, *What **good** is it, my brothers, if someone **says** he has faith but does not have **works**? Can that kind of faith **save** him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things **needed** for the body, what good is **that**? So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is **dead**. But someone will say, “You have **faith** and I have **works**.” Show me your faith **apart** from your works, and I will show you my faith **BY** my works.”* And St. Paul evidently **concurs** with James in Eph. 2:10 where Paul writes, *“For we are God’s **workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus for **good works**, which God prepared **beforehand**, that we should walk in them.”*

But notice that neither James nor Paul is saying we are **SAVED** by good works nor even by a **combination** of God-given faith and good works. Nevertheless, those works are the **FRUIT** of the saving faith the Holy Spirit gives us. Neither Paul nor James is saying that if you do good deeds, **THEN** you’ll be saved. They’re saying that if you’ve been **saved**, **THEN** you’ll naturally do good works, because good **TREES** naturally produce good **FRUIT**...in **this** case, the fruit of the **Spirit** that transforms your gift of **faith** into something you can tangibly share with **others** in both word **AND** deed!

The Apostle James understood that **true** faith changes not only our relationship with **GOD**, but also our relationship with **OTHERS**, in both word **AND** deed. We now **CAN** love our neighbors as ourselves! **NOW**, you and I can see **others** with the same sacrificial eyes our Savior saw **US** when He came to die in our place. **HE** didn’t see rich or poor, black or white, male or female, or young or old. He simply saw precious souls who needed to be **rescued** from a fiery **hell** and **saved** for an eternity in **heaven**.

I’ll never forget Rudi Giuliani’s powerful words at the funeral of a police officer who died saving others on 9/11. Rudi said, “I’ve learned something through all this. When everybody was fleeing that building, and the cops and the firefighters and the EMS people were heading up **into** it, do you think any of them said, *‘I wonder how many **blacks** are up*

there for us to save? I wonder what percentage are whites up here? How many Jews are there? Let's see—are these people making \$400,000 a year or \$24,000?' "No, when you're saving lives, they're ALL precious. And that's how we're supposed to live all the time. How would you want the cops to treat you if you were on the seventy-fifth floor that day? Would you want them to say, 'Excuse me, but I've got to get the bosses out first'? Not exactly! "I confess, I haven't always lived this way. But I'm convinced that God wants us to do it. He wants us to value every human life the way HE does."

When I reread those words, I suddenly realized it doesn't matter **WHERE** I sit when I get to heaven, because nobody's gonna be looking at me anyways. We'll all be looking at the Savior Who **BROUGHT** us there, as He sits on the glorious throne reserved for **HIM ALONE** and where every one of **US** will feel like we've got the best seat in the house!

May God GRANT this in our Savior's Name, Amen!