

6 September, 2009
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Sometimes our readings for worship on Sundays seem really disconnected and sometimes kind of opaque and hard to really see what in the world they were thinking when they chose those readings to be grouped for a particular day. This is not one of those Sundays. There's a pretty clear direction, a pretty clear point being addressed here. We find it in Proverbs, we find it in the epistle of James and we find it also in the gospel. It has to do with our life together. It's a pretty practical, straightforward and not very mysterious, not very mystical point. *You kids play nice. Get along.* There's a little more expansion on it, but that's kind of the gist of it. *Don't be prejudiced.*

Let's look at Proverbs. The book of Proverbs we don't hear from very often. It's in there, in the Old Testament. Some of it is a bit on the order of 'a penny saved is a penny earned.' But some of it, like this little snippet we had today, can be very profound. Yes, it says a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches and favor is better than silver and gold. We would expect scripture to admonish us about the dangers of being captivated by riches.

But then, the rich and the poor have this in common: The Lord is the maker of them all. Now, that's a challenge. Oh, we say that kind of stuff in church, but do we really believe it?

In this country especially we have this elevated idea about the rich. There is sort of a social Darwinism at work. We have this assumption that the rich are better than the poor. There's a show that used to be on television, *The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. And I can do a lot of accents, but I can't do the guy who was the announcer on that. (He's English.) And there's this notion that, ooh, aren't these people cool? Aren't they great? Look at their lavish lifestyle!

Now, 'lifestyles of the poor and desperate' is somewhat different. It's called "Cops." I think it's a reflection on the way we regard those two groups. The poor, when their crimes take place, they are splattered all over the front page. We have entertainment that's based on the filming of their arrests.

When the rich engage in their crimes, the economy goes into a tailspin and people lose their jobs and the world suddenly takes notice. We send one or two to jail in a cushy federal pen, and the rest of us are on our own.

Favoritism. That's what James is warning us about. James is warning us: So you really think you believe in our glorious Lord Jesus when we pander to the rich who show up at our churches and humiliate the poor, ostracize the poor? Whether it's in our churches or in our schools or in our governments or in our businesses or anywhere else, he's challenging us to just stop for a second and think about it. And it's not just the rich and the poor.

Think of all the ways in which we judge one another, the ways in which we divide ourselves off from one another. If you want to get just a snapshot of that, read the letters to the editor of any newspaper: “Stupid democrats.” “Stupid republicans.” “Stupid stupid.” We find so many ways – just make a long list of all of the prejudices that each of us has, or you know people that do. Some group. And it has very little basis in reality.

There is this problem we have in dealing with those that we perceive to be the ‘Others.’ Maybe it’s the way they look, maybe it’s their age, maybe it’s their inability to speak the language and so they express themselves in disruptive ways. Think of all the ways in which we keep the Others away, separating ourselves. Maybe it’s because we’re afraid of them. Maybe it’s because we need somebody to stand on to elevate ourselves above the herd.

Jesus either learned that lesson himself or is using this story of the Syrophenician woman to make the point that our prejudices stand in the way of the coming of the kingdom. The kingdom is not just for our little group, it’s not just for me and mine.

In Mark’s telling of this story (which also shows up in Matthew) this Syrophenician woman, a Gentile, probably a pagan, goes to Jesus and he treats her as was expected for a good Jew to treat any Gentile. He calls her a dog. Not only her, but all of her people. Now, that is a little shocking and we like to explain it away.

But whether Jesus was using this as a teaching tool or if he was really as prejudiced against Gentiles as all of his followers would have been, the point is made. It’s from that point on that the message Jesus brings to us goes from being for the lost sheep of Israel to being a universal message. It’s a turning point. Were it not for that Syrophenician woman, none of us would be Christians, we’re all dogs. We’re all the people that the prejudice was aimed at.

Back to James. James’ real point here, the big point, is the absolute necessity for our faith to be transformative. There must be evidence of that transformation in our lives – as they like to say in the news, ‘On the ground’, ‘In real time’. There must be evidence that being a follower of Christ is having some effect on us. It doesn’t just determine where we’re going to be at 10:00 on Sunday morning, it just doesn’t mean that we have a bible on the coffee table. It doesn’t mean that we like to throw the words, ‘the Lord,’ into our conversation. It means that if it was against the law to be a Christian that there would be sufficient evidence to convict you. Faith without works, faith without transformation, faith without some outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace we receive from that relationship with the divine. It must be present. There must be outward and visible signs.

It’s the only way the kingdom will come. God seems to be unwilling to create the reign of God, the kingdom of God, without our cooperation. We are an essential part of the plan. It requires us to let go of those things that we used to define ourselves apart from all of those other, lowlife, stupid whatever our prejudices may be – let those go. Let

those go, and be real, be present to the reality that is before us. Of that thing that we have in common - whether rich or poor, male or female, Greek or Jew. No matter what we may be, we are all created by the same benevolent, loving God.

Amen.