



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Playing Favorites

A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

September 6, 2009

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

James 2:1-17

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My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For 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, ³and 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," ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God 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? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

The word of the Lord!

This Wednesday, Patrick and I will celebrate our 20th anniversary. While it's not a Silver or Golden anniversary –two decades seems like a lot of time for us to have been together. Having said that, let me be quick to add: it also seems like just yesterday, when the president of the student body at Pittsburgh Seminary where we were married, announced to the seminary community that Monday morning, we had 'consummated' our

marriage in the chapel. Please be assured, he meant ‘consecrated.’ All of that is to say, that over the past several weeks, I have found myself reflecting on the nature of our life together, the community in which we first met and the communities that have surrounded us since that very warm, late summer day in September, 1989.

Of course there are the ‘big’ events: the birth of three wonderful children into our lives and the privilege of helping them grow and learn; the addition of nieces and nephews to the larger family; the loss of grandparents, aunts and uncles and others who have become dear to us; the calls to congregations in different places, and then, of course, the harder side of that experience: leaving those same churches when God beckoned us on. In the midst of all those ‘big’ events are the moments, never taken for granted, but cherished for the joy, learning, growing, and even challenge that they have brought to our life together.

But what I’m drawn to today, as I look back on those early days of our marriage, is not what took place between Patrick and I, but rather the ongoing thread of community that was present before we married and took a new shape with that simple phrase, ‘I do.’ Suddenly, I was part of this new, bigger family as was Patrick. Not because of anything either of us had done, or earned, or planned. But rather, because God had been at work bringing us to that place. During those early years, when we were trying to figure out which end was up, we were ultimately sustained by the generous mercy of the communities of our family and the congregations to which we were called. Our celebrations were richer because of them; our challenges were more bearable, because of the sense of belonging we had. As I consider James’ words to us today, the importance of community comes through very strongly - community that draws us in, and assures us of our place within it – whoever we are, and from wherever we’ve come.

As Pastor John mentioned last Sunday, looking at the first chapter in James, the letter does tend to read like a litany of reminders about things we’ve been learning since we were old enough to walk and talk. Last week James reminded us to not just say the things we ought to do, but to do the things we say we ought to do:

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only!

This week, we might add on to that simple truth:

And do unto everyone the same way!

James’ concern lies with the early church and the ways in which societal norms were creeping into the life the body of Christ. Those with more were being treated differently – better than those with less. James’ opening words call attention to this emerging trend, and even more so, call the church into account for their actions:

*Do you, with your acts of favoritism
really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?*

With those words, we’re reminded of the nature of Jesus’ ministry, and how His grace and mercy brought meaning into the lives of those who were hurting, cast aside or without status in society. Jesus’ ministry provided them a sense of belonging to God in a way they had never been told or felt they belonged before. Historically, a persons’ illness or tragedy were often thought to be an indication of God’s displeasure. When Jesus

reached out to someone who was suffering, he changed this perception, and connected people to God in a new way. When we ‘play favorites,’ when we treat one person better than another because of who they are or what they have, James reminds us, we break God’s law and deny their value as a child of God. We betray the ministry of grace and mercy we’ve been given.

At one level it would seem like a fairly straight forward thing to avoid. As a society we have systems and programs that are designed to help – and the church has been a forerunner in many of these now familiar programs of assistance. In the church we recognize our responsibility to reach out beyond ourselves, and so we respond to disasters with financial gifts and work teams; we support food banks and food pantries; we equip men and women to serve in impoverished and violent places near and far; we encourage ministries of justice - all in the name of Christ – who calls us to those things. We don’t ‘play favorites’ with our ministries, in fact, our ministries are a direct result of our concern for others.

But perhaps, therein lays the rub. Can our ministries of service actually get in the way of our efforts to become communities where belonging and connectedness are experienced?

Several weeks ago a young woman came to the church office seeking some assistance with her rent. She and Karen and I spent some time together, talking about what had happened in her life that brought her to this point. We offered her some suggestions for securing additional resources, and helped her as best we could on behalf of the congregation. As is our practice, we contacted her landlord, who lives out of state, by e-mail. His response indicated that he would accept our help on behalf of this family. The message went on to say, that as a Christian, he had sympathy for what was happening in the life of this family and hoped the best for them. As a businessman however, he had to consider what was best for the business. I had a gut reaction to shoot back an e-mail back suggesting to him that his business practices should be driven by his Christian convictions, not the other way around. I didn’t do that, initially because I was afraid it might make things worse for this family, but on further thought, my restraint had a deeper source.

In a variety of ways, this man’s candid statement reflects the tension we all live with of integrating our faith into everything we do, and in fact, allowing what we believe to drive our words, our actions – our whole way of living: 24/7. When I start to think about what that means, I can’t help but squirm because I know that tension is alive and well.

Our ministries of compassion and service in the church, as well intentioned, and important as they are, *and need to continue to be*, can become a diversion from the churches primary purpose of being communities of faith where people of all walks of life are welcomed and belong. We can become so focused on doing things to help, that we have no time or energy left to be part of people’s lives – to become God’s family – community - to those who come through the doors of the church for help. James’ example of the two worshipers - one well-dressed, one in tired clothing - is a pointed one of a disparity in being a welcoming community. And again, is so obviously wrong, that it almost

seems like a waste of ink to even print. But in our day, we continue the struggle to live out the truth of James' message:

We can't play favorites with God's people

And that's why I squirm – because I find myself growing ever more aware that we, as the church of Christ, are still trying to make sense of this in our time. It's not enough to greet each other warmly each day; it's not enough to be involved with programs and projects; it's not enough to participate in special offerings and help families with rent and gas. All of them are important - but none of them can offer community in and of themselves. None of them create that sense of belonging and acceptance that is at the crux of James' message to us.

But as it turns out - this extension of community – this invitation into a place of belonging is something at which the church is quite good. In every congregation I've served, members and friends of the church who have come through difficult times, point to the church and its ministry to them as a source of great strength. As people look back through the years, they have been able to identify the places in which the church offered them a steadiness that their own lives weren't offering at the moment. And without much effort at all, I could name a number of ways this congregation, collectively, and individually, has reached out in just the past week. We're good at this in the church because we've experienced it and know the value of community in our lives. We *want* to extend it to others.

The challenge for us becomes one of finding ways to integrate this value of community into the tangible ministries of help we provide; of instilling a sense of belonging to God into the practice of our ministries of mission and outreach. One of the interesting ways I've seen this in practice is through the annual Baja Mission Trip, sponsored by the Highland Augusta and Central Valley Mission Communities. You might remember three years ago our Youth Group was part of a team that went to Baja to build homes for the Oaxacan people; other families in the church have gone as participants in the trip over the years as well. What has been encouraging to me, as both a participant in two of those trips and as an observer, is the intentional way the mission has sought to build community: among the participants, between the teams that go and the place in which they're serving. Just yesterday I received the report of this year's trip. Mac Sterrett, the trip's leader writes:

The team of 43 people comprised of members from 12 congregations built three houses for needy Oaxacan Indian farm laborers. The teams received profiles of the families about a month before the trip, allowing congregations to know and pray about the families they would be supporting through their teams. Relationships are stressed as the most important part of the mission, both with the Oaxacans and the missionaries at the local mission base, IDT, and with other members of the team. Through this continued mission work we have seen strong relationships develop between team members and families they have built homes for in past years, as visiting old friends in the colonias is a highlight for many returning team members.

Team members have also built long-term and lasting friendships with the missionaries who live and work in Mexico.

Mac has been known to say: “It’s not about the building - it’s about the people. Play with the kids; sit with the family and talk as best you can.”

Indeed – it’s about the people. That’s true for our ministries wherever they take place. James would have his readers know that a combination of faith and action are the essential qualities for the church’s ministry - a message that is still solid today. There are many helping organizations around, but the church is unique in that we are called to be more than the assistance we offer. We are called to be a community of faith, where what connects us to one another is our mutual need and love for Jesus Christ. Let us pray...

God of Grace and Mercy,

Guide us in our ministries of compassion and care. Help us to reach out in ways that make a tangible difference and provide community and belonging when that is needed. Bless us with the time and energy we need to build and foster new relationships grounded in your love. Through Christ we pray, Amen.