

PLAYING FAVORITES



Solidarity does not require self-sacrifice, but an enlargement of the self to include community with others. - Sharon Welch, *The Feminist Ethic of Risk*

Scripture:

Mark 7:24-37

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

²⁴From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' ²⁸But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' ²⁹Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

James 2:1-13

Warning against Partiality

¹My 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.

PLAYING FAVORITES

When I was twelve years old and living in Connecticut, I remember having a hard time choosing between two Peanuts sweatshirts at the sportswear store. I chose one with Snoopy dancing that said, “To live is to dance and to dance is to live!!” It was good that I rejected the other one, because it was kind of a negative message. It was Lucy yelling, “I love mankind, it’s *people* I can’t stand.” Even back then I was a pretty hardcore Christian, and it seemed somehow inappropriate to think of wearing that statement. But it says something I think we all feel at one time or another. Sometimes it seems that things would go so much more smoothly without the hassle of other human beings!

One of the hardest things for early Christians was trying to love people with the special *agape* love of Christ.

It isn’t any different now, is it?

Many of us have internal struggles when someone who may not be clean or smells funny or wears dirty or raggedy clothes comes around.

It is often easier to treat nicely dressed folks well, and that is just as true here in church as it is in school or at home. So we shouldn’t be surprised if a fellow church member or leader calls us on it, saying, “Do you, with your acts of favoritism, really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” For if a person with lovely designer clothes and jewelry comes in, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one and offer them the best seat and usher the other to the back, have you not made distinctions?

MY MOM

As I was thinking about this hard question, I remembered someone who was very good at loving people that others overlooked...my mom. Her life was a complicated mixture of wealth and class distinction on the one hand and great spirituality on the other. I was shocked when she

taught me the code letters from her youth, “N.O.C.D.” – which meant, “Not our class, dear,” – but I knew that she had had to negotiate the complex high society of blue blood New England. At the same time, her parents were dedicated members of their Episcopal church where I was christened, in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Mom was always studying the Bible and taking classes at Union Seminary in New York, teaching Sunday School and singing in the choir. Her faith was a huge part of her life.

A MOVE TO ARIZONA

After my father died, we moved to Arizona and lived a very different lifestyle from what she had been used to in Connecticut, but for mom and us kids it was in many ways easier and healthier. As she got back on her feet, she became a deacon in the church and increasingly poured herself out in ministries in urban Phoenix. She was forever bringing home odd people from church and other places. She was very open and compassionate. When she remarried eleven years later, many of her single friends came over to tell us how important she had been in helping them rebuild their lives. At her funeral I talked about how, in many ways, she would fit better in heaven; she had never fit in very easily in this world, and though she drove me nuts sometimes, she was in many ways an angel.

TREATING PEOPLE WITH DIGNITY

The main reason I bring up my mom is that she was trained to be socially gracious, and yet because she was genuinely Christian, she had learned to overcome her finely-tuned class sensors and to treat all people with dignity. In this chapter of James, we hear that a Christian who shows partiality sins, and is convicted by the law as a transgressor. This language would have made sense in the context of the church in Jerusalem, but we in Santa Rosa are further removed from the jots and tittles of Hebrew law. Yet even though we have our own ways of weighting some sins as misdemeanors and some as felonies, nevertheless we have to admit that playing favorites is as unlike Jesus in spirit as are the sins of adultery and murder.

MERCY TRIUMPHS OVER JUDGMENT

The last two verses of the passage in James encourage us to speak and act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty, because if we don't show mercy, we won't receive mercy. The next phrase is one of my favorites: "mercy triumphs over judgement." In case you were ever in doubt, there it is!

**I also like the similar quote
from Martin Luther King, Jr.,
"Darkness cannot drive out darkness;
only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate;
only love can do that."**

I love this stuff!! But oh, my, how hard it is in practice, isn't it?

I would venture to say even Jesus had a hard time with this. Is it okay to say that? The stories we heard from Mark 7 certainly leave that impression. You recall that he was traveling in a region north of Israel, the coastal region of Syrian Phoenicia. He couldn't keep his presence secret, and a Gentile from the area begged him to heal her daughter of an evil spirit. Jesus, somewhat uncharacteristically, starts to deny her, saying, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But the woman has a quick comeback, so perfect! She says, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." (So it IS okay for me to share table scraps with my beloved Dodger!) You better believe that woman got what she wanted, and probably a gold star for her trust as well! Not only did Jesus heal a non-Israelite, but he healed her remotely--a result that becomes a tribute both to the mother *and* to God's power.

THE VALIDITY OF MISSION TO FOREIGNERS

Leaving aside the problems we have today with calling Gentiles dogs, we can see that the focus of the story is on the validity of mission to foreigners. When we look at the second healing, this remains the focus. In this one, Jesus is on his

way home, passing through the Decapolis, just east of Galilee. The Decapolis natives were regarded by the Hebrews with disdain similar to Samaritans, yet Jesus does not hesitate to heal the deaf-mute who is brought to him, only taking him away from the crowd. Once again Jesus fails to keep the healing secret. Since this is the last of several miracle stories, the response of the crowd when they find out is a very particular comment on Jesus – the more he told them not to tell, the more they told (surprise, surprise). They were overwhelmed with amazement, saying, "He has done everything well...He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

ESCHATOLOGICAL OBSERVATION

This comment falls into the category of eschatological observation, linking Jesus and his miraculous power with the eternal reign of God. It would have been recognized as such by those who first heard this story, and we are meant to take it as evidence that in Jesus, the Kingdom of God is at hand. We see in these stories two signs of the presence of the kingdom: the inclusion of Gentiles and the fulfillment of promises of healing.

What do these stories from Mark have to do with the letter from James to the early church in Jerusalem, or with us today for that matter? I would start by pointing out that the healing stories happened first, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and long before there was even a glimmer of thought about a new religion that would grow beyond ancient Judaism. The actions of Jesus in these contexts, his momentous choices, point the way for us in mission and ministry: God's grace will not be limited to one people, to one way of life, to one religious group. God's ways are mysterious, and God's grace is greater than anything we can imagine, both towards us and towards others.

UNFORTUNATELY, WE ALL DO IT

As we think about what relevance these stories and this letter have for us, closer to home, I think the advice in James' letter is a little easier to grasp. We know, unfortunately, about playing favorites – we all do it! Even though I was blessed to grow up in a family that was serious

about following Jesus and acted accordingly in ways that supported civil rights and showed mercy and compassion, even with all that, I know that I show partiality in racism, intellectual and social snobbery and other forms of discrimination of which I am even now more or less unaware. Even though I am privileged to serve in a congregation that excels in acts of mercy and compassion, generous with gifts of money, food, volunteer time and more, even so, I know that we can do so much more to show love, acceptance and solidarity with the underprivileged, forgotten and oppressed people in the world.

CHARITY AND JUSTICE

I will share just two areas where I think we Christians in developed countries struggle. The first one will be familiar to Mexico Mission participants from our devotional times – forgive the repetition, but I think it bears multiple hearings. For this I thank Bono of U2, who addressed a National Prayer Breakfast a few years back. His concluding comments highlighted the distinction between charity, at which we have become so adept, and justice, which the Hebrew prophets demanded. We, I think, are somewhat addicted to thinking well of ourselves when we give, and I think we recognize too little how overly blessed and how complacent we are with having and using way more than our share of the world’s resources. We as a people must hold ourselves to an ever higher standard of justice if we claim to follow Jesus. This also involves a humility that acknowledges what we might *learn* from those we serve; the first line of *The Servant Song* asks, “Won’t you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?” and goes on to ask you to “Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.”

SHOWING PARTIALITY

The second area is more like James’s admonition about showing partiality. There will always be for us the challenge of showing hospitality to those who visit our church. The words of Henri Nouwen with which I began the service speak of creating a space where the stranger can enter and become a friend, a space where they don’t *have to* change, but where

change can take place, a space where a wide spectrum of options is opened. I think that means allowing others to enrich our fellowship with their very differences, so that we are together even better equipped to serve the world. Yet we know that learning to love those who seem at first very different, requires patience and many other spiritual gifts. Remember Lucy, “I love mankind, it’s people I can’t stand!”

NURTURED IN GOD’S LOVE

I would be remiss if I did not remind us that we do not merely attempt to imitate Jesus in his extraordinary capacity to love and heal. It is his own Spirit working in our lives that enables us to grow in these areas. As the image in our bulletin shows, we are held in the palm of God’s hands, and in our life together we are nurtured in God’s love, both for us and for the whole world. As we approach the communion table, let us remember, then, that it is God’s love for us that compels us to learn how better to love each other. Let us welcome all who would learn about and follow Jesus to this table! And let us try to learn the truth so aptly expressed in the words of Sharon Welch, that “Solidarity does not require self-sacrifice, but an enlargement of the self to include community with other.” Amen.



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