

Who Do We Welcome?

James 2:1-17

I know a local couple who have a music ministry. The husband plays guitar and harmonica and the wife sings. They have played at Living Branches, as well as other local venues, for many years. One song they do that always tickles my funny bone, is “The Church Lady” song. As he strums his guitar, she, bedecked in a large floppy “church lady” hat sings the tune. By the title, you might guess how it goes. The church lady sings to the church visitor - “get out of my pew”, “get out of my kitchen”, and so on. Stereotypical, yes. Amusing, definitely. The way Jesus wants us to relate to people who come to our church, most definitely NOT.

While the church lady may have asked anyone, regardless of their wealth, to get out of her pew, chances are pretty good that she might have at least thought twice before shooing away someone who looked like they could add substantially to the church’s coffers. As we read the letter from James today, we can see that church ladies (and men) have been around for a very long time. Even in the early church the problem of favoritism had raised its ugly head.

Who would have thought that these early followers of Jesus, some who may have even been eyewitnesses to his ministry, could become so

judgmental? And that's what they were being – “judging books by their covers”-type of people. Attracted to bling, the early Christians showed favoritism to those who clearly were of the upper class. James feels the need to point out to these early church folk, that the same people they were fawning over in the synagogue were the same people who were oppressing them. Due to their wealth, they could afford to settle disputes in court for substantial sums. These same people likely charged exorbitant rents or fixed their scales in the market to bring higher prices on their wares. While fawning over the well-to-do, but not-so-nice visitors to the synagogue, church folk were turning their backs on “salt of the earth” types, simply because they weren't very “attractive”.

Had they forgotten that Jesus came to bring Good News to the poor? The very same people they were relegating to the cheap seats were just the ones that Jesus was asking them to reach with His message. How well could those folks receive that message sitting on the floor at the back of the room?

It would appear that “celebrity worship” had very early beginnings. Can you see parallels with society now? How many names in the news today are people who are famous simply for being famous? Because they appear on television and drape themselves in high fashion, wearing diamonds the size of golf balls, people fall all over themselves just to stand in their shadow.

It would seem that even Christians were not immune to the allure of wealth and power. Had they forgotten the Lord's admonition to Samuel as he looked upon Jesse's sons and struggled to understand why God rejected these men over their brother, David? We read this in 1 Samuel 16:

⁷ ... "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7

I have no doubt each of us here can think of someone who appeared very attractive at first glance: nice clothes, bright white smile, perfect posture, yet the soul of that person was dark and very unattractive. At the same time, I believe each of us can call to mind that person of limited means, possibly even limited intellect, who shone forth the light of Christ in such a way that you could almost hear the angels singing when you were in their presence. The Bible tells us that God is no respecter of persons. He cares not what your income is, or your level of education, what job you hold, or what kind of car you drive. Neither should we. What truly matters is - are you loving your neighbor as yourself?

Perhaps that is our problem right there. How many of us in the world today don't even know how to love ourselves? In a world where many are trying to keep up with, or ahead of the Jones's, self-defeating

emotions can become overwhelming. We want to identify so much with the up and comers, that we seek to hang on to those we view as somehow better than ourselves, all the while harboring dislike for ourselves because we are not like them. If we struggle to show love to ourselves, how can we possibly show love to others? Not giving into the pressure to conform to the world, to keep up with the Jones's, can be a help in learning to love ourselves.

I think James was onto something when he admonished his readers to not let public opinion influence how they lived out their new lives as Christians. If public opinion says that only the famous are worthy, yet we are showing deference to the meek and lowly, what will the public think of us? James says, not to worry! We are not to be swayed by what the world thinks. We are to hold fast to what God calls us to do.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians points out that there are to be no divisions among believers:

²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:27-28

Unlike the world around us, we are not to separate people into different categories or classes. All people are created by God, and all have value in God's kingdom. Who are we to decide that maybe God didn't *really*

know what he was doing when he created that person who struggles financially, mentally, or socially? Judging people is not our calling, loving people is!

We would do well then to remember that we are to love as we are loved. These words from Romans 5 should always be before us:

⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

That is a humbling thought. Despite not being able to provide anything in return to God, he chose to redeem his fallen people. And he redeemed not just the high-ranking officials, not just the ones who prayed the loudest, the longest, or the hardest, not just those who had vast fortunes that could benefit the church. He redeemed ALL people.

With this knowledge, shouldn't we feel foolish when we gravitate toward only the attractive, well-off visitor? Can we claim the power we have in Christ to openly welcome the poor, the needy, the "unclean" into our church, to love them the way God loves us?

James reminds us that it's not enough to simply call ourselves Christians. We must not only "talk the talk", but we most definitely must "walk the walk". You've heard the old saying "talk is cheap". This is so very true. It costs us nothing to offer warm, but empty, platitudes to those who are in need or hurting. The true sign of faith is responding

to God's call when it is placed right in front of us - the person in need, the one viewed by society as "less than".

This morning I invite all of us to recommit to loving our neighbor as ourself. To not give in to "celebrity worship", but to look past the outward appearance to truly see the person before us. To look for those opportunities presented to us by God to invite the stranger into our midst and share the Good News that is meant for all people. May it be so.

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