

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

James 2:1-13

One Sunday morning an old cowboy entered a church just before services were to begin. Although the old man and his clothes were spotlessly clean, he wore jeans, a denim shirt and boots that were very worn and ragged. In his hand he carried a worn-out old hat and an equally worn-out old Bible. The church he entered was in a very upscale and exclusive part of the city. It was the largest and most beautiful church the old cowboy had ever seen. It had high cathedral ceilings, ornate statues, beautiful murals and stained-glass windows, plush carpet and velvet like cushioned pews. The building must have cost many millions of dollars to build and maintain. The men, women and children of the congregation were all dressed in the finest and most expensive suits, dresses, shoes and jewelry the old cowboy had ever witnessed. As the poorly dressed cowboy took a seat, the others moved away from him. No one greeted him. No one welcomed him. No one offered a handshake. No one spoke to him. They were all appalled at his appearance and did not attempt to hide the fact. There were many glances in his direction as the others frowned and commented among themselves about his shabby attire. A few chuckles and giggles came from some of the younger members. As the old cowboy was leaving the church, the preacher approached him. Instead of welcoming him, the preacher asked the cowboy to do him a favor. "Before you come back in here again, have a talk with God and ask him what he thinks would be appropriate attire for worshiping in this church," the preacher said. The old cowboy assured the preacher he would do that and left. The very next Sunday morning the old cowboy showed back up for the services wearing the same ragged jeans, shirt, boots and hat. Once again, the congregation was appalled at his appearance. He was completely shunned and ignored again. The preacher noticed the man still wearing his ragged clothes and boots, and instead of beginning his sermon, stepped down from the pulpit and walked over to where the man sat alone. "I thought I asked you to speak to God before you came back to our church," the preacher said. "I did," replied the old cowboy. "If you spoke to God, what did he tell you the proper attire should be for worshiping in here?" asked the preacher. "Well sir," said the old cowboy, "God told me that he wouldn't have the slightest idea what was appropriate attire for worshiping in your church. He says he's never even been in here." Ouch!

This morning we continue with our second installment on the Letter of James. As a brief refresher, the book of James looks a bit like the Old Testament book of Proverbs dressed up in New Testament clothes. Its consistent focus on practical action in the life of faith is reminiscent of the Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament, encouraging God's people to act like God's people. The pages of James are filled with direct commands to pursue a life of holiness. For James, a faith that does not produce real life change is a faith that is worthless. (Swindoll)

Last week we learned the importance of words as followers of Jesus Christ, this week focuses on humility, or more pointedly on NOT pulling social rank in church, as our opening story suggests. The scriptural lead in from the end of last week's reading can be found in James 1:25 "*But you must never stop looking at the perfect law that sets you free.*" This week, the "perfect law" is referred to as the "royal law," in some translations: "*You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*" (NRSV, NIV,

KJV) James places the “royal law” against the practice of showing favoritism, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” It is called the royal law because Jesus uses it to summarize the law in regard to others. Love of neighbor is the essence of Christian faith and obedience. (Matthew 22:39; Galatians 5:14) In a community of faith called out in Christ’s name, there is no place for distinctions between wealthy and poor Christians. (Feasting, 38) And there are times we are all guilty of doing this. I know I have. Even the poor make these distinctions. But this is not to be the way of true followers of Jesus Christ.

Carl Hurly, a professional humorist from Kentucky, tells of an elderly deacon at the Baptist church who wore the same suit to church week in and week out, year after year. When the suit became so threadbare as to be almost unwearable, some wealthier members of the church took up a collection to buy him a new suit. The deacon took the money quietly and humbly. Being from a small town, they soon learned that he had gone to the best men's store in town and purchased a fine suit with new shoes, a new shirt and a new tie. The Baptists were waiting for him on Sunday. But the deacon never arrived. Afraid that they had offended him, some of the other deacons visited him to see if he was all right. When they asked him about his new suit, he admitted he had bought one. He also admitted it looked good on him. In fact, he confessed that as he was dressing one Sunday morning, he looked at himself in his new clothes in the mirror. He said, "I just looked at myself and that new suit -- and it was so fashionable and good-looking -- that I just decided to go to the Episcopal Church instead."

The world is always assessing people, sizing them up, putting them down, and establishing a pecking order. And God, who sees and loves all alike, wants the church to reflect that generous universal love in how it behaves. In some parts of the early church they had a rule that if a regular member of the congregation came into church, the usher would look after them, but if a stranger came in, particularly a poor stranger, the bishop himself would leave his chair and go to the door to welcome the newcomer. (N.T. Wright, 14)

Supposing you were that poor person who happened to show up at a worship service, then you might feel shame and embarrassment along with physical hunger and other pains. Why would anyone come to a worship service dressed only in unwashed tattered and ragged clothing? It would seem to me showing up like this is a display of total disrespect. I believe that when this does happen there is a deeper hunger than physical hunger – perhaps a hunger to hear a word of hope, or perhaps receive a scrap of respect from those who are known as “People of God.” James is making a theological point in that we are to show *agape* love which enables us to bear one another’s burdens under the most trying of circumstances. Agape love is "the highest form of love, charity" and "the love of God for man and of man for God."

The second part of today’s text presents both an interesting view of the “royal law,” as well as a dilemma for just about every human being. Verse 10 “*If you obey every law except one, you are still guilty of breaking them all.*” Yikes. I am fairly certain that I am guilty of breaking at least one of the commandments on a daily basis, particularly in the area of speech. James refers again to this paradox in verse 12 and 13 *Speak and act like people who will be judged by the law that sets us free. Do this, because on the Day of Judgment there will be no pity for those who have*

not had pity on others. But even in judgment, God is merciful! This is good news for you and me – God’s mercy is sovereign – as in God always has the last word. God’s mercy will triumph. But, says N.T. Wright, “the minute you say, ‘Oh well, that’s all right, God will forgive, so it doesn’t matter what I do,’” particularly when ‘what I do’ includes discriminating against the poor – then precisely because God is the God of mercy, God must act in judgment. God will not forever tolerate a world in which mercy is not the ultimate rule of life. Further, mercy isn’t the same as shoulder-shrugging tolerance; an anything goes attitude or the “whatever” comment so common today. Anything doesn’t go, because anything includes arrogance, corruption, blasphemy, favoritism, and lawbreaking of all kinds. Since the main subject of James is our words and actions think of excusing certain types of behavior with the comment, “boys will be boys! Or, I am only being human!” No, James says. The Gospel says that God’s mercy shines particularly in cases of the poor, the widow and orphan...both the Old and New Testament are quite clear on this.

So What? What does this mean for us, a community of faith who is literally surrounded by the poor and homeless? Let me share with you what I have seen in my two short months as your pastor. Time and time again I have seen genuine concern and compassion for our neighbor within and without the walls of the Valley Mission. I see respect given to the Food Pantry patrons. I see the men and women of the church be true servants just as Jesus taught us when he washed the feet of his disciples. And the list goes on – you donate food on a regular basis and school supplies the beginning the school year, and you make financial donations, you show genuine caring for those in need.

We are often caught between a rock and a hard place with our proximity to Valley Mission because there are genuine and realistic limits to what we can and should do. There is always room for growth in any ministry, but I am a firm believer in giving the Holy Spirit room to bring about growth in a church. I also am a firm believer in celebrating the things that truly mark you as followers of the “royal law.” And the Food Pantry ministry is something which needs celebrating! Through this and other circumstances we have found ourselves facing together, I am confident that you all have a clear idea of who is your neighbor.

A closing favorite illustration – a bit long, but too good not to share. His name is Bill. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans, and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. He is brilliant. He is kind of profound and very, very bright. He became a Christian while attending college. Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They want to develop a ministry to the students but are not sure how to go about it. One day Bill decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, holes in his jeans, T-shirt and his wild hair. The service has already started, so Bill starts down the aisle looking for a seat. The church is completely packed and he can't find a seat. By now, people are really looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything. Bill gets closer and closer to the pulpit. When he realizes there are no seats, he just squats down right on the carpet. By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick. About this time, the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church, a deacon is slowly making his way toward Bill. Now the deacon is in his eighties, has silver-gray hair, and is wearing a three-piece suit. He is a godly

man — very elegant, very dignified, and very courtly. He walks with a cane. As he starts walking toward this boy, everyone is saying to themselves that you can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid on the floor? It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. The minister can't even preach the sermon until the deacon does what he has to do. When the deacon finally reaches Bill, the church watches as this elderly man drops his cane on the floor and with great difficulty, he lowers himself and sits down next to Bill and worships with him so he won't be alone. Everyone chokes up with emotion. When the minister gains control, he says, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget."