



northminster presbyterian church

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SCRIPTURE: James 2:1-17 Mark 7:24-37

SERMON: Partial God, Partial Faith (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

Black Raspberry Chocolate Truffle from Brusters, Cherry Garcia from Ben and Jerry's or Hand-churned Homemade Vanilla from Mayfield? What is your favorite? *To which one are you partial?*

Would you prefer to spend a weekend shopping in New York City, skiing in Aspen, or spent quietly in a quaint Bed and Breakfast in Maine? What is your favorite? *To which one are you partial?*

Cabernet, Merlot or Syrah? Bordeaux, Burgundy or Australian? Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio or Sauvignon Blanc? What's your favorite? *To which one are you partial?*

There are times and occasions when it is okay to have favorites, to be partial to one thought or idea or product over any others. No one is likely to get too upset at you because you go for Cherry Garcia and Cabernet while skiing in Aspen. But if you put it out there that you are a Bulldog or a Yellow Jacket or a Volunteer or a Tiger (from Auburn) or a Tiger (from Clemson) or a Tiger from Dakota Wesleyan University or from DePauw University or from LSU or from Tennessee State or from Missouri!! (In passing: Why is Tiger so cheap and common?) If you put it out there for your team, then likely someone will be more than happy to share with you exactly who they have as their favorites!

The issue of favoritism is one of the two major issue addressed in the section of the Letter of James that we read today. Being good detectives, we can rightly deduce that since this issue is addressed by James that he knows that in the church communities with which he was familiar, there were a variety of people, people of more and less means, some richer in the goods of this world than others. But James is very clear. Such distinctions must not divide the church community. No one was to be more welcome because they were financially and materially wealthy. The best seats, whether they were way in the back or up front, were not for sale to those with the deepest pockets. James makes this case on the basis that God has a special devotion to the poor, and therefore if the church was partial to the rich and powerful over others this would reveal a lack of basic faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

The consistent stance towards the poor adopted by Jesus in the Gospels reflects God's partiality toward those who are neediest. The Psalms often declare God's special care for those who are poor, weak and needy. The prophets declare that the blessings of the Messiah will first come to those who are oppressed, broken-hearted and poor while at the same time denouncing those who surround themselves with wealth, thereby cutting themselves off from God, ignoring the poorest and the weakest.

This partiality of God is akin to that of parents who love all their children equally, yet must attend most to the one who has the greatest needs. God has love enough for all, and all of us blessed and inspired by that love must, *MUST* share God's compassion for the most vulnerable of God's children, our sisters and brothers.

As I see it, to be partial to and make a fuss over the wealthy makes a mockery of the entire church community. It places the wealthy in an isolated and undignified position; it shows no respect for those who are monetarily poor. It requires that some make judgments about their fellow-believers; ushering some to the good seats and others to the corner. Who would ever volunteer to usher at Northminster Presbyterian Church if they were asked to so judge and discriminate? In such a community, everyone loses, everyone suffers, the fabric of the church is torn, the unity of the community is shredded and deathly barriers frustrate the development of

open friendships and caring fellowship.

What is needed is in fact the very opposite of this. Partial faith is to be sought and nurtured and practiced. Partial faith is to be expressed not towards those who are well-off in worldly goods but to those who lack such security and means, to the poor. This partial faith results from the partial God, the God who is biased towards the poor and the weak and the oppressed. Let me also underline what we heard: *that God is partial to those who show mercy*. That since God judges with mercy, we need to be merciful or ourselves be victims of our own faulty judgments.

The second aspect of the challenge of these words from James today comes to the fore in the statement that God, partial to all and partial to the poor, is also partial to those whose faith is lived out in their actions. As we read from the NRSV: "14 *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and 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? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*" In the modern version, The Message: "14 *Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? 15 For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved 16 and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup - where does that get you? 17 Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?"*

God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense!! Please note this is not the same as what we often say, "Actions speaks louder than words". What it does say is that we must bring together and hold together our proclamation and action. Christian action is good, true and beautiful when and as it coheres with its divine origin in the Word. When the divine Script takes shape and is embodied in our "living performance," there is a graceful "rehearsal" of the truth of what it means that God became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. For us, in us, through us, the living Word is no longer restricted to the page; *now it is enacted on the world stage!*

God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense!! It is a "God act" for us as a church to become a community that is consistent with God's purposes. It is a "God act" when we refuse to defer to the rich, when we seek the wisdom of the poor and when we enter into solidarity with the poor. "God acts" include such behaviors and attitudes; "God acts" include showing mercy. As a congregation, our "God acts" must express our deepest values of covenantal responsibility to God and to our neighbors. The contrast is not between faith and works, *but between living faith and lifeless faith.*

All of us, disciples of Jesus Christ, are called by God to be vigilant in taking action on behalf of God's justice. God is asking us to strive for downward mobility. To find just ways of identifying ourselves with the poor, seeking to identify with them, to learn from them, at the same time as we work to alleviate the oppression they face. But you might be saying, "Who is poor?" Exactly who is it that God want us to treat as special favorites, "rich in faith"? I offer three categories of persons, each posing different dilemmas for pastors and for congregations.

The *first* is the scruffy or unclean and unknown stranger, James' own example. This is the person who comes past the church asking for food or more usually for money. This person often appears as Mr. or Ms. Pathetic, and usually the story they tell is full of twists and turns and frankly sometimes just amazing imagination. Our responses to such situations vary, on the basis of where we are at the time, who is with us and other factors that come to light. Sometimes, we really do want to offer help if we can get a fix on the real problem. Other times we help and then come to regret our lack of clear limits. Some may believe that it is always our obligation to give, regardless of how often or how blatantly we are ripped off. On the other hand, there is an argument for good stewardship of finite resources not just money or food but also pastoral time. In the life and ministry of Northminster each month we send some of your contributions to North Fulton Community Charities, and believing that the folks there have the best handle on all the needs and resources we direct our strangers there.

A *second* person who needs our care and attention is the one with obvious "special needs." The person facing disability, who need wheelchair space, the blind person with their seeing-eye dogs or those who struggle with emotional or mental challenges. To have persons present and valued

who are varied in their abilities, and may look and act differently from some assumed norm, is a strong witness to the inclusion of the poor and of all of us into the kingdom of God. Such “diversity and inclusion” pre-figures God’s welcome to all of us, differently-enabled as we are and will be.

The *third* group with whom we will have contact each Sunday are those who don’t quite seem to understand our Order of Worship or the cultural norms that may come easily to those of us who grew up in the church, but may be foreign to those who have not worshipped in a community of faith ever or for a very long time! They may bring their coffee to worship or their children or their cell phone. Such people are not to be isolated. If they sense this, they will never return. Instead they need to be welcomed, offered help and assistance, and as much love, care and attention as they require. Yes, to include everyone may mean that some of our other values, such as “good order” and a contemplative atmosphere, may lose some ground, but only in the cause of welcoming the poor, of expressing our God-talk in God-acts.

In North American church and society today there is a growing sense of separation between believing and belonging. Many organizations have seen membership roles dwindle. While many people consider themselves to be “spiritual” persons, they are unaffiliated in any meaningful way with a church community. The book, “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of Civic Commitment in America” helped draw attention to this phenomenon. It concludes that, “we are becoming a nation of loners who are losing a sense of caring for the wider good.”

As Christian people, any separating of our believing from the community of that believing and belonging is a grave menace to our spiritual growth. Standing aside or apart from the community greatly increases the risk that we will become hearers of the word only. Only within the community, only by being active in the community, can we best link our God-talk and our God-acts. In my reading last week, I came across what I think is a very helpful way of framing a conversation with our friends and neighbors as we seek to try and invite them to share in the life of our congregation. Rather than asking them if they belong to a church, we might better ask them “Do you attend any particular church on a regular basis?” Those last four words, “*on a regular basis*”, are crucial, and may open ways for us to invite them here.

Jesus sought to knit the first disciples together in a profound unity, both with Him as their leader and with each other. This unity, which Jesus still seeks in and for His Church, is based on God-talk and God-acts. There were in the first century and there always will be other groups and teams, other than Team Jesus, who then and now seek to express their cohesiveness by building an exclusive elite. But this was not and *is not* the way of Jesus, this was not and is not to be the way in Team Jesus.

In this church, we are not building an exclusive club, but we are about building a Team which can meet the needs of other people, especially the poor. One result of this will likely be that we can increase the size of Team Jesus. This cannot ever be the prime motivation for our life as a church. Jesus never says, “Be successful” but Jesus always says, “*Be faithful.*” We speak and act as we do not to be successful as the world might see it, but to be faithful because this is what lasts and what matters.

God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense!! As companions together with Jesus, we are all sent out into this new week to speak and act that all can find God’s love and mercy for themselves. And in that finding, discover that in this community *there is a place for all to find encouragement in being Team Jesus Together. Amen.*

James 2:1-17

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. **10**For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. **11**For 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. **12**So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. **13**For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. **14**What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? **15**If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, **16**and 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? **17**So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Mark 7:24-37

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, **25**but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. **26**Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. **27**He 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.” **28**But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” **29**Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” **30**So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. **31**Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. **32**They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. **33**He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. **34**Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” **35**And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. **36**Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. **37**They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

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