

A story is told about a church in the downtown area of a city. One Sunday morning the congregation arrived to find a homeless person camped outside on their doorstep. He was dirty with long hair and ragged clothes, and he smelled. As congregants arrived they saw the man but turned their heads and stepped around him, not meeting his eye or greeting him.

Everyone gathered in the sanctuary, waiting expectantly for the worship service to start. The organist began to play and the choir processed in and took their seats. A stillness fell over those gathered as they waited for the service to begin. Moments passed and people began to get restless. The service wasn't starting—where was the pastor? Suddenly the homeless man entered through the sanctuary doors. Murmurs of disapproval rumbled through the congregation—surely he wasn't going to worship with them? An usher approached the man and directed him to the back of the sanctuary.

But the man shook off the usher's hand and moved toward the front. Taking off his hat and coat and a wig, it was revealed that the homeless man was actually the pastor. He looked around at his congregation and said, *As I sat at the doorstep of this church, no one stopped to invite me in or even speak to me. And when I did come in, I was directed to the back of the sanctuary where no one would need to sit next to me. Why did no one welcome me?*

This is an old sermon illustration that I remember from the 80s or 90s but it is still relevant today—maybe even more relevant today. And it illustrates well what James is talking about in our scripture passage today.

If you remember last week, the passage from James reminded his audience—and us—that because all good things that come to us are from God, we must be doers of the word and not just hearers. It isn't enough to *proclaim* our faith, to say that we are faithful, we must also act on it, working hard to keep ourselves from wickedness *but also* practicing pure religion—defined here and elsewhere in the bible as to care for widows and orphans in their distress.

Today we continue in James, where he continues by chastising his readers for showing partiality, and it isn't just a matter of choice or preference that James is talking about. You know, I might say that I prefer thin crust pizza and someone else might say that they're partial to thick crust. Or I like the Vols and you like Kentucky. Or I like green but you prefer blue. Those are ways of being partial that don't make a difference in our world, are actually a good thing. It would be pretty boring if we were all exactly alike with the same preferences and dislikes and so forth.

What James is talking about here is social partiality—giving preference to someone else, in this case, because they are wealthy. James seems to be speaking about something that was really happening, and he questions their belief in Christ. For James, acts of partiality such as giving the best seat in the assembly to a rich person while directing a poor person to sit on the floor or stand at the back are not how we truly follow Christ; and he cites without naming one of the beatitudes, reminding them that the poor are chosen by God to inherit God's kingdom. He also reminds them that the rich are the ones who oppress not only the poor, because they are poor; but also believers like themselves by taking them to court because of their faith and by cursing in the name of Christ.

Notice that James doesn't say to turn either of these groups away and he isn't telling the members of this assembly to turn away the rich or to show preference for the poor. Rather, he is reminding people to not show preference based on wealth or social standing. Whatever a person's bank account looks like, however someone is dressed or whatever kind of job they have (or if they don't have a job!) people of Christ are to treat everyone in the assembly the same. We can almost hear James quoting Paul: *we are all one in Christ Jesus.*

Treating others impartially is hard, isn't it? We all have people we're more attracted to (and I don't mean romantically.) We all have people who interest us more, who we feel a natural affinity with, who are easier for us to be around. There are groups of people who we aren't a part of or who we don't know anyone from that we might find unpleasant or even scary. And there are groups of people we aspire to be a part of—wealthy, powerful people; talented or beautiful people; celebrities, politicians, business people. Sometimes even as we recognize their *spiritual* poverty we're honored when they notice us. Sometimes even as we recognize the faith of the materially impoverished we turn away from them, push them aside, blame them for their poverty. In either case the law of Christ requires mercy rather than judgement, for those in Christ have received mercy themselves.

James then takes it a step further: if you see someone in need and don't work to meet their needs your faith means nothing. Even *demons* believe in Christ and are afraid. So your faith, by itself, isn't enough. We must remember that at that time it was the common belief that there was a spiritual realm that included all sorts of heavenly beings, including demons. Jesus himself is shown often in the gospels removing demons from human beings; and more than once the demons speak to Jesus, begging him to leave them alone. The power of Jesus is in his ability to heal the brokenness of human beings by removing demons from their midst, healing human beings from illnesses, bringing wholeness and peace to their lives and restoring them to community. Based on the way Jesus operated it just isn't enough to have faith, we must also *do* things, things that we hope make the world more like the holy creation envisioned by God at the beginning of time.

A few weeks ago the city of Cincinnati decided to disband a homeless camp downtown. We don't know the different reasons people had for living in this camp but we can guess; we *do* know the reasons given for disbanding the camp and but again can only guess whether or not the reasons were valid-- unless we spent time there or were involved in the process.

But to me this is a good illustration of what James is talking about. The city leaders made a conscious choice *for* people who have the means to afford housing in the area or who work in the area, and a choice *against* those who don't have those means. This is a choice that is played out over and over again in many places outside of Cincinnati, choices developers make to build large, expensive houses and apartment buildings and while creating few or no affordable housing communities. When there are 3 or 4 times as many people who need shelter than there are shelters, we are making a choice against the poor and, by default, a choice for the wealthy.

The point is this: there are real world consequences for following the law (as in the Torah) or following the way of Jesus, and real world consequences for not following them. There are real world consequences when we choose to be faithful but not act on that faith, acting as Jesus did or living into God's call that we *do justice, act with kindness, and walk humbly with God*. There are real world consequences when we *do* combine faith and works as well—we end up with organizations like Habitat for Humanity and Family Promise which are both organizations that work to help rehome those who have no homes. There are real world consequences when we decide to faithfully follow our call to create after school programs for kids, or help bring clean water to humble communities in Nicaragua, or cook a meal for our friends at Cornerstone. I mean, when do you feel more connected and alive in Christ? When you're completely focused on practicing your faith? Or when you're also involved in doing something that makes God's creation just a little bit better, something that makes someone else's life a little brighter or a little bit safer?

Yes, we are saved by grace through our faith in Jesus Christ. But true faith goes beyond our head and heart and out through our hands and feet. It isn't an either/or situation but a both/and.