

James 2: 1-7, 14-17 "Playing Favorites" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/5/21

When I was attending seminary in Ft. Worth, I worked at a home for unwed pregnant teenagers considering adoption. Young women came from all over the country to stay during their pregnancy with the understanding that if they placed their child for adoption, all bills were covered. Food, lodging, schooling, counseling, medical care, social life, fun and even Sunday morning worship and spiritual care (hence my presence) were all included. It was an eye-opening experience, sometimes very rewarding and other times quite disturbing. I will never forget two young women during my time. One was a head cheerleader at her high school, 16 years old, beautiful and popular. Her parents and her pulled up in a limo, dressed like they had just stocked up at the local Nieman Marcus before coming. Her suitcase was filled with fancy maternity clothes, she donned the latest hairstyle, and charmed everyone with her bubbly personality. From North Carolina, her parents had researched all the maternity homes in the nation and proudly stated they wanted their daughter to be at the best facility there was, the one that ended up on the cover of Life magazine and featured in a 20/20 special. I can't count the number of times I heard the stories of how the famous reporter had come spent the week on campus highlighting what a wonderful place this was, almost like a secret resort for young women. The media had glorified the existence of this home and downplayed the trauma that so many girls went through in carrying a child to full term, in feeling that child grow inside of them and then having to surrender that child, often being counseled to not see the child after it was born, not hold the child, but to instead just let it, that child, become a distant memory.

In the same week that Miss Nieman Marcus arrived, another 16 year old showed up carrying a trash bag of everything she owned in life. She took a city bus to get to us with no family support and not exactly sure who the father of her child was. Whereas the first young lady spoke of a colorful world that included college and beauty pageants, the other spoke of a grey world without hope. The first easily got her boyfriend to relinquish parental rights while the second didn't even know how to reach the young men she had been with. The first was welcomed with open arms, the second with much hesitation and suspicion, partly because she was black and there were laws in Texas about the placement of black babies in white

homes, which was the majority of potential adoptive parents for this upscale, very expensive program. Texas law required no discrimination with regards to admissions but social workers still spoke in low whispers that they didn't know how they would recoup the costs of accepting this young woman. She saw their stares, their disapproval, and that was the beginning of my journey into unpacking the prophetic words of James.

James became one of my favorite books to teach to the staff, administration, and those young women. The author of James was writing to a community in crisis, a crisis of bigotry and preferential treatment. Rich brothers and sisters in Christ were treating poorer brothers and sisters in Christ badly. The rich were shown preference while the poor went without food, clothing, and shelter. We aren't sure why the church James is speaking to is making such distinctions. It was against their law as it clearly stated in Leviticus 19, "You shall show no preferential treatment, you shall make no distinctions between the rich and the poor." Distinguishing the worth of someone based on their wealth or any other characteristic was not just against the law, it was against the very nature of community and church. But I could tell that for some, it was heady business. My supervisor, a master level social worker, would love telling me stories of the famous people she had met in her lifetime; associations with people on Capitol Hill that were just names in the paper to me. That kind of association can get to you if you aren't careful. It can give you an identity or a fake sense of self worth by just attaching yourself to someone who is well-known and you begin to think by that process, by that association, you become somebody. People will say, "See that picture over there on the piano. I was at Graceland, had my picture taken with Elvis." Or "Hey do you see that autograph of Peyton Manning on a game ball? That's worth a lot, you know. People stand in line for hours to have something like that." Why? It gives an individual some worth, doesn't it?

Dr. Fred Craddock notes that what is most amazing about our text today comes in the questions James poses to the community. "Why are you catering and giving preferential treatment to those people who are the very ones who abuse you and suppress you and deny you and mistreat you? They double the rent, they cut the wages, they won't give you a fair price for your produce. They oppress you and abuse you in every way and here you are

kowtowing and bowing at their feet, 'Oh please, have my seat. It's great to have you. Did you notice who's here this morning?' Maybe you can answer why that is? Why is it that the abused still cater to the abuser? Why does the woman, who spent those years with a violent alcoholic husband, once divorced, marry another alcoholic? Why does the battered spouse finally get free only to return to the batterer? The writer says, "I don't understand it. The very ones who put you down, you elevate?" Somerset Maugham once said, "The most deeply ingrained, the most deeply rooted instinct in civilized humanity is the desire for the approval of other people." It is natural and starts out without any diseased condition at all – we all have it. The problem arises, however, when that desire for approval begins to work on our psyche, when we start getting the compliments like, "Oh good sermon, Reverend. That was your best, the best one you've ever preached. I've never heard a better sermon." Then what are you supposed to do? If that was the best, what are you supposed to do next Sunday? It gets addicting – I need that approval, I have to have it. Then begins the decline. What can I do to get it? I must give people what they want. Find out what they want and then say that. Find out what they like, give them that, even if it's just bread and circus, meet their expectations. That'll do it. Or one thing that always works is publicly confessing your weaknesses and failures; they'll think you are really honest. You reveal yourself as just one of the people so they'll say, "Even though she has gold rings on her fingers; even though his suit is from Saks Fifth Avenue, we saw him in blue jeans the other day working in the yard. I feel better about her now so I will support her."

There once was a southern senator, long dead, who was master at this. When the time came for reelection, he would put on old clothes and pull out his old Plymouth stored in the garage for use during election years. He would drive it around the countryside stopping at farmhouses along the way. He introduced himself and say, "You know I'm your senator, been working for you and would like for you to vote for me. And by the way, I'm sorry to say this, but while I'm here, do you mind if I go to the restroom." The host would say, "Oh sure, just come in here; I haven't cleaned it up but you're welcome to use my restroom." "Oh no," he said, "I will just go out here behind a tree somewhere." Reporters followed him once and said he went to the bathroom 37 times in one morning, and everywhere he did, he got that

vote. You can manipulate, you can treat people differently depending on what you want from them, you can twist what is right and wrong to justify your actions, but ultimately we aren't fooling anyone, especially God. When I started teaching out of the book of James, at first, the administration and my supervisor liked it, liked the idea of teaching those girls the value of good deeds, of treating others equally, the dangers of gossip and so on. Then we got to the place where James uplifts the poor and chastises the rich, where James condemns the wealthy abusers and challenges preferential treatment. Then it became business and it was clear my time was up. All that talk about care for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed had no place in their bottom line.

In Jim Wallis' first year of seminary, he and his friends did a thorough Bible study on every verse that deals with the poor and social injustice. They came up with thousands. In the first 3 Gospels alone, one out of every 10 and in Luke it is one out of 7 verses which deal with the poor and social injustice. Yet they could not recall a single sermon on the poor in their home churches. One of them then found an old Bible and began to cut out every single Biblical text about the poor; out went the Psalms and most of the Prophets disappeared. That old Bible would hardly hold together. They had created a Bible full of holes. So James says, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."