

Worship Series: Faithful Living; Sermon Title: "Playing on the Same Team"
James 2:1-17; Leviticus 19:15-18; Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Luke 14:12-14
Salem United Methodist Church; September 9, 2018
Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

The five chapters of the Letter of James is filled with instructions on how to live one's faith. One of the issues that James confronts is social ostracism that existed in the early church. Showing partiality threatened to undermine Jesus' message of loving our neighbors, and thus the very fabric of the church. Have you ever experienced partiality, ostracism, or prejudice?

"My brothers and sisters..." James begins this second chapter with these endearing relational words. He chooses the word, "my" to declare the intimate relationship he has with these followers of Jesus. And it is because of this relationship, James cares enough to confront them about allowing the social pressure of being partial to infiltrate the community of faith. He claims to be partial is to turn away from Jesus. To be partial is a sin.

Wait a minute! Why is being partial a sin? We all have different opinions. Every day we choose which sports teams we will follow. We choose which businesses to use, which clubs to join, which church to attend, and which candidate to support. Showing favoritism and partiality in these situations is not only expected, but needed. So what is James' issue? In the community of faith we are all equal in God's eyes. God is an equal opportunity covenant giver. No one is left out. So James gives this example of how this group was showing partiality. Two people come into your church. One is obviously wealthy with rings and fine clothes. The other is dirty, smelly, and their clothes are rags. How are they treated? James probably witnessed the rich person given the seat of honor while impoverished believers were ordered to sit at the feet of others, the lowliest position. This is how people were treated in social occasions during the first century. The rich and powerful elevated to the best seats and the poor sat on the floor. James accuses them of segregation among the believers and called it evil. He doesn't sugar coat his message!

James continually reaches back into the Hebrew Scriptures and the teachings of Jesus to build the foundation for his statements. James states that God has a preferential option for the poor. God chooses to be on the side of the poor. His words reflect Leviticus, Proverbs, and the prophets such as Amos and Micah. Jesus frequently speaks about caring for the poor. Our Gospel lesson is just one example. Why does God choose those who are poor by worldly standards? James says because they are rich in faith. When you have nothing to very little, when you don't know where your next meal is coming from, when you are down and out, who do you call on for help? Who do you trust to provide? Who has your back? A power that is greater than human power. God. I have been to impoverished areas in this hemisphere where people who have little to nothing have such strong faith in God. God gives them hope to face the challenges of today. Their faces beam when they speak of their faith. Those of us who are wealthy, do our faces beam when we speak of our faith in Christ? Do we speak of our faith in Christ? Do we have faith in Christ? Who do we rely on? When we have a high IQ or intellect, we rely on ourselves to solve our problems. When we have acquired more than we need, more than many can even begin to imagine, we rely on our own resources. Just through enough money at the problem and we can solve anything. We who are wealthy by the world's standards rely on ourselves. We don't need God. In ourselves we trust.

James accuses the wealthy for oppressing the poor. The wealthy in the first century would loan money to the poor with high interest. It was impossible for them to pay it back. If the wealthy saw someone who owed them money on the street they could grab them and drag them into court. If the

poor couldn't pay on the spot they would be thrown into jail. James calls this injustice a sin just like adultery or murder. This was a tough message for James' brothers and sisters to hear. It is tough for us to hear today, too. Are there ways in which we oppress those who are poor? Yes, there are. Some say things like, the poor don't deserve.....(fill in the blank). Some say, "I worked hard for my money. Let the poor work hard for theirs." Many "poor" are working hard for their money-two or three jobs and still aren't earning enough to meet their basic needs. However, there are those who are affluent who will do whatever they can to help someone in need.

Montgomery County is considered one of the wealthiest counties in our nation, but we are also a county who has a heart for the poor. We are a county that when we know of needs, we work to meet those needs. Organizations like Olney Help and Manna are constantly helping to meet food needs. There is a clothing center that meets clothing needs. There are shelters for the homeless: separate shelters for men, women, and families. There are organizations that help them transition into affordable housing. Funds to both assist the poor to meet their basic needs and also to gain a footing in the world come from the government, benefactors, and a variety of interfaith organizations. Not only is our county committed to help the poor, we here at Salem are, too. We fix homes via the Appalachia Service Project, feed the hungry through Olney Help, create food baskets during holidays, serve meals to those in need through The Lord's Table. These are ways in which we serve the wider community. But we are also a congregation that serves those in need within our faith community. When a need is mentioned, we meet that need over and over again. In addition, several of us are helping to support family members who are in need. Yet, God continues to call us as individuals and as a faith community to play on the same team for the same goal: to love God and neighbor by serving those in need.

My brothers and sisters, if James was writing this letter to Salem, I think he would have written it differently. He would be complimenting us in how we do not show partiality, but work together. We are a congregation that welcomes both the wealthy and those who have less. We not only welcome people from every economic strata, we genuinely care for each other. Also, we have welcomed people who had nothing in their pockets and made sure that they walked out of here with something to help them along. Our discretionary fund has helped countless people to pay rent, utilities, and medical bills. My dear brothers and sisters, we at Salem are a generous, compassionate congregation. As James instructed, we do not judge. We offer mercy.

James contests that discrimination against the poor is contrary to being faithful to God. Showing partiality is the opposite of God's royal law of loving our neighbor as yourself. Those who offer love to both rich and poor, who offer mercy will receive mercy. There is a prayer used for meditating, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy." This prayer is an antidote to judging others and arrogance. When we pray this prayer, quietly and repeatedly, we come to realize just how much mercy we receive from God. There is a Hebrew word for God's mercy, *hesed*, which encompasses God's steadfast, compassionate, merciful love for everyone. The *hesed* love that God shows all of us, God expects us to show to each other without judging. We who have faith are to be willing to use whatever resources we have to help those who are in need. If we say we have faith, but do nothing, James doesn't mince words. Our faith is more than worthless. It is dead!

John Wesley subscribed to faith in Christ as one that is to be put into action with these words. "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, if ever you can." My words to you: Keep playing on the same team!

Challenge: Would you consider tithing or 10% your groceries every week for Olney Help? Or donate 10% of the monthly total of our grocery bill to Olney Help? Or find other ways to help the poor?

Resources: *Wesley Bible Studies: James*; *The Fire of Little Jim* by William Hulme; *James* by Dan McCartney

