

September 16, 2018

James 2: 1-17

Prayer: Dear Lord, please go with us into the study of your disciple James. Help us to adopt his boldness and outspokenness. In Jesus' name we make our prayer. Amen.

'Can I Bring My Friends?'

I have just returned from preaching this morning at Church of the Redeemer on Mauldin Road. It is an Episcopal church that is close to the motels on I-85 that a lot of people use as residences. So the church get lots of people at the door asking for help.

Quite appropriately, members are getting ready to study *Toxic Charity* this fall. As many of you know, *Toxic Charity* is Robert Lupton's book about how we can unintentionally hurt people with endless giving and the creation of dependency.

I very much believe in what he says, and I suppose that's why they invited me to kick off their study. But I'm not sure I told them what they wanted to hear.

Because I said they needed to decide a fundamental question: Do they want to come up with a strategy for dealing with people who come to their door for help? Or do they want to invite those people into their congregation?

Those are two very different things.

Obviously, at Triune we have chosen the latter. And so people who come to our door for help are invited to be part of our church. And that means all the things you see going on at any minute here – giving out bulletins, taking up offering, leading the responsive reading,

ushering, serving communion, serving dinner, doing laundry, emptying trash, mopping floors. All of us working together, serving Jesus by serving each other.

One of my most humbling moments during my time here came just two weeks ago at Wayne Barton's memorial service. Wayne had a lot of friends and family members who were willing to speak. His niece's husband provided the music, including Elton John's "Goodbye, Yellow Brick Road."

Wayne was a cherished parishioner AND volunteer who donated the painting of Jesus with the crown of thorns that hangs in our dining room. He also served in four separate Triune Circles.

That means he spent four-plus years meeting with the groups who encircled Tonya, Nancy, Russ and Vincent.

That means he had dinner every Monday night with those leaders and all their other volunteers.

That means he hosted barbecues and took two of them into his home at separate times.

That means he did everything in his power to encourage these motivated people to rise above their circumstances.

What touched me is that all four of those Circles leaders came to his memorial service. One woman brought her parents who told us how well she's doing.

One woman is now a homeowner.

The most recent graduate, Vincent Grant, gave an eloquent part of the eulogy.

After the service, Vincent and all the remaining volunteers from his Circle – Joe and Melanie and Jo-Carol – went out to lunch. And as they gathered around the table, the restaurant soundtrack began to play “Good-bye, Yellow Brick Road.”

Those kind of things don’t happen when you hand goods out the church door. They happen when you invite people into your church community.

Today’s Scripture passage comes from my favorite epistle writer, James. And he’s pretty insistent on this invitation and inclusion thing. **James 2: 1-17:**

2 My 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?

⁸ You 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.

¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹For 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. ¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³For 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?

¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

It's easy to follow James during the first and last parts of this passage. We are to welcome the poor into fellowship as enthusiastically as we welcome the rich. And we are to provide basic, practical needs as well as welcome.

It's the middle portion that's a little more difficult to understand. But basically James is talking about the difference between Jewish law and the new law ushered in by Jesus. Many scholars think that James might be the earthly brother of Jesus, the head of the church in Jerusalem. We aren't sure of that.

But his point is that to try to live by the Old Testament law, we must keep every point of that law. So maybe we don't commit adultery, but we commit murder.

Maybe we don't steal, but we fail to keep the Sabbath holy.

Maybe we honor our father and mother, but was that the name of the Lord I just took in vain?

And of course in those days, there were hundreds of other rabbinic laws that were considered part of "the Law."

Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed.

Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.

Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.

In other words, very few of them – or us – could live blamelessly under the law.

"So speak," James says, "and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty."

What is this law of liberty? NIV translates it as "the law that gives freedom." What James is talking about is the law by which Jesus lived and died. The law of grace and mercy.

"For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy," he writes. **"Mercy triumphs over judgment."**

Now you couldn't get much closer to Jesus' teachings than that – mercy triumphs over judgment. But James is the Rodney Dangerfield of the New Testament: He gets no respect.

Back in the 1500s, the founder of Protestantism, Martin Luther, didn't care for the book of James. He called it "an epistle of straw" and said it "had nothing of the nature of the gospel about it."

James speaks elsewhere of being “doers of the word and not hearers only.” And he says here that **“Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”**

If you know anything about Martin Luther and the Reformers, you’ll know how crazy that made them. They viewed James’s writing as a collection of Jewish morals and wisdom literature, with only the thinnest veneer of Christianity laid atop it.

Hardly worth reading, they said. Hardly worth canonization.

But I don’t see that. To me, James instructs what Jesus instructs.

You’ll do fine, he says, if you simply follow the “royal law,” **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”**

This law comes straight from Leviticus, it’s true. (Lev. 19: 18) But Jesus is the one who raises it to royal status. In the book of Matthew, an expert in the law asks him, **“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”**

“Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.

“And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’ ”

James is merely preaching on what Jesus commanded. He’s explaining the Word. He’s telling the people of the first century how they are to behave as followers of Christ.

They are to love their neighbors as themselves. Trying to follow the whole of the law as stated in Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy is tricky, he says. You would do well to simply, **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

And what’s his example? Well, it just happens to be Jesus’ favorite example – money. Money. Could any example possibly speak more to our lives today than money?

“If a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly” -- and the word here is synagogue or meeting house, which is like our chapel – **“and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and 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,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?”**

The South African bishop Peter Storey said, “You cannot ask Jesus into your heart alone. He will ask, ‘Can I bring my friends?’ You will look at his friends, the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed, and you will hesitate. But Jesus is clear: ‘Only if I can bring my friends.’ ”

Jesus’s friends are about as rowdy as Hank Williams Jr.’s. I happen to think that welcoming Jesus’s rowdy friends requires more of us than handing goods out the church door. I think it includes welcoming them into our lives.

And that’s not only a moral, theological imperative. It’s a practical one if we are going to help people.

How many times have you heard how one person – one teacher, one coach, one social worker, one Circle volunteer – made a profound difference in someone’s life? How many times was one person able to draw someone into community?

Many of you football fans have probably read about USC defensive lineman Javon Kinlaw. When Javon was 10, he and his mother and brother lost their home in Hyattsville, Maryland. They moved into a neighbor’s unfinished basement.

Two months later they moved to Washington, DC, where Javon’s mother found work, but they never again had a home of their own. They shuttled among friends and family. Finally when Javon was 16, his mother sent him to Charleston to live with his father.

But Javon and his dad didn’t get along, so he pretty much lived with the family of a high school friend from Goose Creek. He was already huge so he joined the football team at Goose Creek High, where the defensive coordinator took an interest in him. Then USC Coach Steve Spurrier expressed interest. But Javon’s grades were bad and interest by major programs waned.

Predictably, Javon’s attitude worsened. *Greenville News* sportswriter Manie Robinson described it as “a rut between indifference and indignation.”

And there’s the challenge right there. Even his high school football coach said with that attitude, it would have been easy to give up on him. Many people recommended giving up on him. But the coach didn’t.

Then USC changed coaches and Will Muschamp drove to Goose Creek to meet with Javon. By then the teenager was homeless, and agreed to go to a junior college in Mississippi to get his GED and college eligibility. He figured he had nothing to lose.

Before he left for Mississippi, he played in the Shrine Bowl. All the players visited Shriners Hospital for Children here in Greenville. And according to his coach, something happened during that visit that changed Javon. A light came on.

“He really fell in love with those kids . . .,” said his high school coach Chris Candor. “I swear when he came back he just seemed changed, and the light just kept on shining.”

I might describe it a little differently. I’d say Javon was invited to join a community that day. To serve a community.

Down in Mississippi, he found another mentor at Jones County Junior College, who pushed him to All-American honors and the dean’s list. He got scholarship offers from Alabama and Southern Cal, but honored his commitment to South Carolina. Now he’s a junior and a player whom Coach Candor calls “the greatest turnaround I’ve ever seen in my life with any kid.”

And USC Coach Muschamp says, “Sometimes a young man just needs an opportunity, needs somebody to believe in him.”

Isn’t that what we all need? Somebody to believe in us even when we’re in *a rut between indifference and indignation*.

Some of us are fortunate enough to get that belief from stable families, stable homes. And some of us must pick it up elsewhere. A teacher, a coach, a Circle, a welcoming church.

You cannot ask Jesus into your heart alone. He will ask, 'Can I bring my friends?' You will look at his friends, the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed, and you will hesitate. But Jesus is clear: 'Only if I can bring my friends.'

I pray that Triune will always be the kind of place that welcomes Jesus and his friends -
- whether they're wearing the gold rings or the dirty clothes that James wrote about.

Amen.