

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 5, 2021

(James 2:1-17)

I'd like to begin today by sharing a glimpse into the life of a visitor to a church several years ago. This particular church was one that the person had wanted to visit for quite some time. It was a reasonably long drive from their home so they got up early that morning to make sure they arrived with time to spare. From the outset though the reality of what they found was far different from what they had hoped to find. After walking up to the front door of the sanctuary they received a perfunctory "hello" as they were handed a bulletin ... and that was it. At the passing of the peace no one turned in their direction to smile or wave or share a few words. No one passed anything to them, peace or otherwise.

Still holding out hope and accepting the invitation offered during the announcements for everyone to visit the parish hall for a cup of coffee and some conversation, they walked into the room to discover a large crowd. Yet throughout the roughly 20 minutes or so they were there, there were a few side glances trying to figure out who they were but absolutely no conversation. Even a few quick words with the priest didn't fill the void they felt growing. Not one other person walked up for even the briefest of chats, to say "good morning" or ask if this was their first visit.

There was no welcome.

What this visitor experienced was a series of moments of differentiation. It seemed to them that the congregation maintained a mental list with two columns: on one side, a list of those who were known by the congregation; on the other, a list of those who weren't. This person of course fell into the latter category, and even after being in two large gatherings in two separate spaces at the church they left feeling like they had lived through something of a paradox: being in a room filled with people and still being very alone.

The word used in today's reading from James describing in some respects what this person had experienced is found in verse nine: they were showing *partiality*. In the example I gave, partiality was given ... preference was given ... to the known versus the unknown. In this reading the specific example used was a worshipping community showing partiality between rich and poor ... a preference for rich *over* poor. But partiality of rich over poor is not the way of God, and it certainly was not ... and is not ... the way of Jesus. In fact, we're reminded in verse five that "God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom,"¹ an

¹ James 2:5 (NRSV).

echo of the words of Jesus from Matthew, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”²

The scholar Pheme Perkins writes, “Verse 5 reminds readers that God has chosen the poor to inherit the kingdom. James 1:9-10 stated a generalized version of the same principle, which contrasted the lowly and the rich. In this version, the poor are rich in faith as a result of God’s choice. Since God’s choice has overturned the partiality that was typical of ancient society, no one who behaves differently can claim faith in Jesus Christ.”³ It is a very similar thought to one found in another commentary which reads, “Those who show partiality divide the community according to wealth and poverty. Their favoritism for the wealthy aligns them with the world and places them at odds with God.”⁴

No one who behaves differently can claim faith in Jesus Christ. Their favoritism aligns them with the world and places them at odds with God. It’s a very quick move from greeter to transgressor.

So what is perhaps the most immediate way to show love to your neighbor ... to reclaim faith in Jesus Christ ... to align with God over the world ... to visibly enact who we claim to be? In a word, *welcome* ... unconditional welcome, perhaps even radical welcome. The scholar N. T. Wright talks about a rule in the early church that today may seem unusual and perhaps even a bit radical. “If a regular member of the congregation came into the church the usher would look after them, but ... if a stranger came in, particular a poor stranger, the bishop himself would leave his chair and go to the door to welcome the newcomer.”⁵ That’s the sort of radical welcome we don’t necessarily see today, but it’s a very strong way of showing our adherence once again to words very important in our faith tradition: respecting the dignity of every human being.

To the point of respecting dignity, I also believe we’re called to go further ... to step beyond simply the act of welcome and the avoidance of partiality. It goes to the call to *honor* rather than *dishonor*. It goes to the call perhaps to embrace what we don’t see more than what we do see. For anyone coming to our door ... the physical door of this church or to the figurative doors where we stand in the wider world ... we must remain mindful of the fact that the visible signs of wealth or poverty (to continue with the example of James) may be quite different beneath the surface.

Indeed, it’s important to remember that the words “rich” and “poor” can be used to describe far more than physical wealth. There are some who live in the richness of hope and others who struggle to survive in the impoverished state of hopelessness. There are those who are rich in love and those who live feeling that that richness of

² Matthew 5:3 (NRSV).

³ Pheme Perkins. *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude*, p. 110 (Kindle edition).

⁴ Aaron L. Uitti. “James 2:1-10 (11-13), 14-17 – Exegetical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 4*, p. 41.

⁵ N. T. Wright. *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone: James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 14.

love has passed them by. There are those who live feeling the abundance of God's redemption and forgiveness and others who feel a poverty of spirit, seeing themselves as unredeemed and unforgiven.

These feelings of wealth and poverty ... of richness and poorness ... cannot be judged strictly by what we see. Those who seem the happiest and most joyful are sometimes those experiencing the greatest inner turmoil. On the other hand, those who seem quiet and subdued may sometimes be those with the greatest reasons to celebrate. It's impossible to know simply by looking at them. Because of that, elimination of partiality is even more significant ... for us, certainly, because that is what we're called to do, but especially for visitors. They see they are welcomed, whoever they are, whatever they are experiencing, and wherever they are in their journey.

Welcome the stranger. Show no partiality. Align with God. Build the kingdom.

Amen.