

# Body & Soul

Part 2 of Sermon Series: *A Faith That Works*

a sermon based on

James 2:1-17

(with reference to Mark 7:24-37)

and delivered on

September 9, 2018

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Do you ever think about this space where we come to worship? I don't mean whether you admire the windows or the decorations. I don't the layout of the floor plan, or where the screen is or isn't on the wall. I don't mean the size of the building or how it has changed over the years. Do you ever think about this space where we come to worship and wonder why we come to a church building to worship?

Maybe not. If you have, probably not very often. This is just where we do church. Other congregations do the same. Mostly. Some worship in rented spaces to make a point or while building up funds to build a building. Some worship in homes – mostly in places where it's dangerous to be a Christian.

But that's not how it always was. In the early days the Church met mostly in homes. Even though it was dangerous to be a Christian that wasn't the reason. They did it because that was the space available and the church – although growing – was still small.

Because the early church met in homes, it was useful to meet in the larger homes. Right? That only makes sense. But who in the church do you think had the bigger, nicer homes that could accommodate the "assembly" as James called it in verse two of the passage we heard a moment ago? Would it be the poor servant sleeping in a loft above his master's stable? Would it be the couple living in the small one room house that would have been standard for the day? Maybe for some small group meetings. Who would have had the room?

It would have been the more affluent members. Right? They had the space. They had furniture. But there were problems. My house, my rules. Right? Didn't Jesus say something about waiting for the host to seat you rather than assuming the place of honor? (Lk 14:8-10) So who gets what seat? The guy who just came in after shoveling manure in the barn, he's probably not going to get invited to sit on the new sofa. He might even be asked to stand outside and look in through the window. But who's going to get the good seats? The folks who can afford the nice clothes and need to keep them nice? It's only hospitable, right?

This is where James calls them out, "Can you really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ – with your acts of favoritism?" (Jas 2:1) That same Jesus who told you to let the host decide who gets to sit where, follows up in the very next two sentences saying,

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (It's about humility – not the host's privilege)

<sup>12</sup>(Then Jesus) said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. <sup>13</sup>But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." (Lk 14:11-13)

Who would have been the friends of the host? Those with a bit more, right? What if it was somebody even more well off than the host? That's an honor, right? There is a tendency to brag about those in our circle because it makes us better.

Sort of like those four Catholic mothers having coffee when the first says, "You know my Johnny just got ordained as a priest. Now, when he enters a room, people say, 'Hello, Father.'" The second one, won't have any of it. "That's very nice dear. But you do know that my Philip is a bishop. When he comes into a room people stand and say, 'Your Eminence.'" " "

Not to be outdone the third mother says, "Ladies, all of this silliness. But you do know that my Francis is pope, and that people bow and say, 'Your Holiness' when he comes into the room." What's the fourth mother to say, except, "My Tommy, he's a plumber, but he's seven foot two

and weighs four hundred and twenty pounds. When he walks into a room, people just stare ... and say, "My gawd!"?

This issue of favoritism that James confronts hasn't gone away. It keeps coming back, but there's a bigger problem with it that he addresses. See the bigger problem isn't that some people might have their feelings hurt. I think people just rolled with that, they were used to it in the day to day. Just being able to come into a nice house may have been a privilege. The bigger issue – the practical issue for James as he calls them to a faith that works – is that when things are wrapping up – the hosts probably walks everyone to the door and says, "Good night. See you next Sunday," as he shuts the door and stops in the kitchen for a snack on his way to his warm bed, ignoring the fact that one of the members only had on a light tunic (We'll make it modern, a T-shirt and shorts) and that he would be sleeping in a lean-to tonight and it might get cold.

"Be well," he says to the couple leaving with their young daughter with that persistent cough and a high deductible insurance plan that means they can't afford the insurance.

That kind of faith – James says is dead. I'll go further and say, "dead with a capital D."

The struggle James sees (and he says it) is that the same rich folks that you want to honor in your assembly – even on their first visit – aren't these the same folks who made the decision to jack up the deductibles so that they could have a better bottom line? Aren't they the same folks who pushed Meredith out of her home, and blamed her for the mortgage that she couldn't afford when gas prices shot up past \$4/gal, which helped their investment portfolio.

Jesus Christ went to the cross to glorify every part of every human being, not just the "right kind." In that passage from Mark today, we hear about the Syrophenician woman (a Canaanite – a Palestinian). At first it sounds like he rejected her, and her daughter's need for healing. But he's saying this in front of his disciples and others, so I really believe he only says it to make a point – that it doesn't matter if she fits the mold, I love her and I have come to glorify her and her kind, as well. Then he makes her daughter whole.

It's not just enough to be polite to one another. It's not just enough to greet the guest in the pew next to us, if we don't go further and make sure that they have their needs met. Sometimes that's what keeps people away from church; they don't feel worthy. That's what we're called to do. We're called to help them feel worthy; because Jesus Christ gives us the ability to value human dignity when we let our faith in him live. When we turn to Jesus we can move beyond that oh so human tendency to look down on another or to blame them for their difficulties.

As Christians God invites us to be his mouthpiece to honor every single person. Sometimes that's going to happen in a simple practical way like buying lunch for a hungry child, or helping an elderly neighbor buy her medication. But it also means speaking up for the guy in the dead-end job who just can't make ends meet on what his employer pays him. I don't mean just complaining or campaigning for a higher minimum wage, but standing up for his dignity, because there is dignity in all work whether it be designing high tech aerospace systems or emptying the wastebaskets in the office. There's dignity in all work whether it's managing a chain of restaurants or flipping the burgers. As Christians, as those who know that we aren't worthy of a love that would end up on a cross for our sake, as Christians we are called to acknowledge that dignity. But not only with our lips. Sometimes with our tips.

What good is it to chat up the waitress if we're stingy with our tip when we can only afford the meal because the price is kept artificially low by her low wage? That's where are faith works or doesn't. If you're an employer, do you respect your employees? Are you polite to them? Do you pay them enough to take care of their families and to have enough of a cushion that they're

not worried about what next week will bring, so that maybe they would accept an invitation to church and an opportunity to hear the Gospel?

My experience as a pastor is that most of us want to be that sort of person because our relationship with Jesus Christ just makes that bubble up. But that at the same time, we struggle.

A faith that works takes care of one another. A faith that works is one that makes every effort to be sure that everyone whose life we can impact has what they need, not because we're so worthy but because Jesus trusts us to. AMEN.