

9.8.2024 Pentecost 16

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Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146; James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

“God’s impartial love”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today’s readings teach us about God’s steadfast love, yet these readings are not easy. God’s love is impartial. God’s love is the same for everyone. God is always searching us out with love, waiting for us to return to him. Yet this kind of impartial love is never easy for human beings. James calls this love the “royal law” of scripture: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*” (Leviticus 19:18). We aspire to this love, yet we also often fail to love our neighbor as ourselves. So many things get in the way: our biases, our prejudices, and our outright hatreds often prevent us from loving others as we love ourselves.

James was a keen observer of human behavior, writing of the ways we show favoritism to those with wealth, prestige, and power, while disregarding the poor, the vulnerable, and the powerless. James also notices how wealth allows certain people to use the courts to settle disputes with the weak and the poor. James very clearly voices God’s preferential option for the poor, writing, “*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?*”

James is mining a central theme of Hebrew scripture, God’s love and justice for the oppressed. In Psalm 146, the Psalmist writes that the Lord God “*executes justice for the oppressed...and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*” James insists that Christians must honor this biblical theme, making their faith known through works of love.

It is impossible to read this section of James while also not hearing the echo of Jesus’ words in Matthew 25, in the coming of Jesus the King to separate people like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Then those at Jesus’ left hand will say, “*Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?*” Then the King will answer them, “*Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.*” And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.” (Mt. 25:44-45).

This ethical code of justice for the weak and the poor runs deeply through the gospel message

of Jesus Christ. It has long been said that the good news of God's love is meant to be "a comfort to the afflicted and an affliction to the comfortable." If the gospel makes us feel uncomfortable, then we are indeed in need of the grace. We are in need of living our faith active in love for others. At the end of my life, I am very certain that God will not ask me about my denomination or the creeds I confessed; rather, God will ask me how I used the grace and faith that he gave me each day to live for others.

I think it is safe to say that most of us in this sanctuary fall in the category of the comfortable. We may not be terribly rich, but we have food, shelter, and importantly, the power of faith to help others. The gospel is meant to encourage us to use our wealth, resources, and power with love and compassion for others.

As Lutherans, we often say we are "saved by grace through faith," and indeed this is true. Faith is the gift of grace to believe in God's promises for us. However, James's issue is not with grace, but rather with faith that does not show the works of God's grace. Faith is given for a purpose, so that freed by grace from sin and selfishness, we might live to love and serve our neighbor.

The key to understanding James is in the words of Leviticus, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" Jesus' command to love one another is built upon this verse from Leviticus. As Christians, we are known, not by what we say about ourselves but by the love we show for others. Jesus bluntly said as much to his disciples at the last supper: "*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:35). We are known as Christians not by our theology or the creeds we confess, but by the love we show for others. The inescapable question of today's readings is: "How will Jesus the King receive me when I arrive at the banquet of his kingdom?"

Today's gospel shows us what God's impartial love looks like. Jesus helped both men and women, Gentile and Jew. Jesus met people where they were with grace and healing. The episode with the Syrophenician woman is well known. With words that were borderline insulting, Jesus tested her faith, and she responded with a remarkable faith saying, "*Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.*" This Gentile woman would not let Jesus go without healing for her daughter. Do we have such tenacity of faith in Jesus?

What is also clear to me is that we are all this woman: we are Gentiles. As Paul writes in Romans (11:17-24), we have all been grafted onto the root of Israel by faith. We, like the

Syrophenician woman were outside of grace and have been grafted into the promises that God made to Israel. And yet, Christians can often appear arrogant and privileged, lording their faith over others. There is something to learn here: we are the recipients of grace so that we might share this grace with others. Is our faith, like the Syrophenician woman, tenacious and always ready to challenge Jesus for grace that will help us live and work for others?

In the second story of healing in today's gospel, Jesus opened the ears and loosed the tongue of a man who could neither hear nor speak. We live in a world in which many remain spiritually deaf and mute. Though we are surrounded by many voices shouting at the top of their lungs about all manner of political, social, and economic issues, precious few speak with voices loosed proclaiming love and care for the weak and the poor. Grace opens our ears and frees our voices for a purpose: to hear, speak, and work with faith active in love for all people.

Today is "God's Work, Our Hands" Sunday, but so is every day. Today we have several projects, a "Prayer Commitment Bowl" in which you may leave a prayer about work you want to do this week or this month. You can support Social Ministry by giving to the Pat's Place fall drive or by giving to Habitat for Humanity's 2024 Fall Build. You might volunteer in the Soup Kitchen, or this winter, in Room in the Inn. There are many ways to serve!

God's grace blesses us with faith for a purpose, that we might love our neighbors as ourselves. With your faith, believe as if everything depended upon God and daily work as if everything depended upon you.

Jesus is with you. Have faith in him and work for good in this world. Amen.