

“Finding Favoritism with God” CHC 9-6-15

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-9

I recall a time in my young life, riding in the back seat of the car, fighting with my brother. My brother Paul, now a Lutheran pastor in Denver, was three and a half years younger. At the time I was 8 and he was half way between 4 and 5. I definitely was the oppressor, he the oppressed. We were loud, hitting each other, mean words avalanching out of our mouths. So much so that dad, after several warnings, angrily pulled the car to the side of the highway, stopped, opened his door and promptly opened the rear door on my side. My brother was quick to point out that it was my fault, speaking to the injustice of my behavior. I, on the other hand, protested that he was annoying me and that, of course, he made me act this way.

My dad, with mom watching on, was not interested in a reasoned conversation as to who was to blame. The hammer came down and there was immediate silence in the back seat as dad got back in the car and drove off. It would have been a poignant moment for him to have ‘celebrated calm’. It was the two of us, however, who were ‘celebrating calm’.

Our scripture texts this morning speak to life’s injustices and unbalances. James expresses indignation toward his brothers and sisters in Christ; “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” James watches as believers show partiality to the affluent, acting deferentially, seating them in privileged sections while ignoring the needs of the poor among them, saying, “Stand there” or “Sit at my feet”. James levels them; “have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?”

James observes our proclivity to serve self-interest. CEO’s may earn 300 times what their workers earn. A football or basketball coach often earns more than 15-20 times over what other faculty make. Economic inequities are found at multiple levels of our society.

According to the UN, nearly half the world’s population, 2.8 billion people, survive on less than \$2.00 per day. About 20% of the world’s population, 1.2 billion people, survive on less than \$1.00 a day. 20% of Champaign County lives below the poverty level. This represents over 40,000 people right here in Champaign.

Pope Frances, as he began his papal ministry, called attention to the disparity existing in the world between rich and poor. “If globalization has greatly increased the collective wealth of the whole and of several individualized states, it has also exacerbated the gaps between different social groups, creating new inequalities and poverty in those countries considered to be the richest”. Sounding like James who writes, “Is it not the rich who oppress you?” the Pope states that “huge salaries and bonuses are symptoms of an economy based on greed and inequality” and called again for nations to narrow the wealth gap.

Lest we turn away, wringing our hands and saying that is just the way things are, God does have something to say to us. The scriptures acknowledge that the playing field of life is not level, nor have they ever been. Jesus noted the kind actions of a woman anointing his feet with costly perfume. As the disciples complain of the cost and how that money might have gone to the poor, Jesus responds, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (John 12:8). However, we are invited to have a conversation with God about the disparities and think through what God may be asking of us, especially those of us on the affluent side of the ledger.

We begin with Proverbs 22:2; "The rich and poor have this in common; the Lord is the maker of them all". Then we meet this moral challenge; "Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity...Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor".

Throughout the Old Testament we see God commending unselfish giving. Fields were not to be harvested to the edges, nor be re-harvested. That was so the poor, the widow, and the alien, the immigrants, had access to the left-overs. We all share a common humanity, each of us bearing the image of God. We also live in the reality of economic inequality staring us in the face each day. Isaiah 57:6-7 speaks the mind and heart of God to us, "Is not this the fast that I chose...Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house...?"

James presses his congregation with these words, "You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'. But if you show partiality, you commit sin..." Peter, preaching to a mixed race crowd, begins his sermon, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34),

Scripture calls us out of our propensity for basing our identities on social distinctions. They are, as James says, "evil". The reality is this: we work with people as people. People are the objects of God's love and redemption. We don't look at people through an ideological lens. Rich or poor, each person is to be respected and treated with impartiality and justly. Acts of favoritism are not consistent, James tells us, for those proclaiming a faith in Jesus Christ.

As Christ followers we swim against the currents of the world's prevailing values and practices. God isn't inviting us to look at our affluence and feel guilty. We are being asked to examine ourselves, our own values and attitudes. I suspect that deep down we all deal with areas of prejudice and exclusion of others in some way or another. That is what makes it so difficult to dismantle the injustices 'out there'. They have a way of finding their way inside of us.

Jesus brings to us a vision of the Kingdom of God which is inclusive of all people and nations. This vision isn't just 'out there' in some distant time. The Kingdom of God is among and within us effecting change both in us as well as moving us to work for an equitable society. This is what the Proverbs would describe as being a generous person; "they share their bread with the poor". It may be as simple as responding to an immediate need, someone needing food, medical support, or home furnishings.

There is also a more challenging road God calls some to go. God may call us to engage the inequitable balance of injustice in the social structure. Catherine Rowen, a Christian and part of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility is interviewed by Sojourners magazine. Asked what justice issues are of current interest, she speaks of the need for an open, well-regulated global financial system that serves the needs of all, one in which banks assume accountability for the risk from their business activities. She stresses the need for corporations to find a balance between seeking profits and the moral mandate to meet public health needs.

Asked what offers hope, she notes the great interest in microfinance, credit unions, cooperatives, and community-supported agriculture. She observes the number of companies moving to see ecological sustainability and corporate responsibility as key elements of their businesses (Sojourners, January, 2012, p.46),

Part of our mission funding through F-150 is going to microfinance projects in a third world country. The Environmental committee raises our awareness around issues of ecological sustainability. Courageous Conversations will offer an opportunity to hear Dr. Jennifer Harvey, author of two books on racial reconciliation and justice, Tuesday evening September 15th from 6-7:30 in our sanctuary. We support DREAM House, an effort spearheaded by member Tracy Dace to address the needs of young African-American males in our community. Our ESL program was selected by Champaign Urbana Immigration Forum to receive the group's Organizational Award. This is for creating a welcoming atmosphere for immigrants in the Champaign-Urbana community. We will be recognized this Saturday, the 12th, from 3-4:30 at the Crystal Lake Boat House in Urbana. Recently we hosted a panel discussion in our sanctuary with Congressman Rodney Davis on working with Illinois farmers and agricultural trade with Cuba. This is a result of our partnership with the Luyano Presbyterian church in Havana and ongoing conversations surrounding economic justice between our two countries.

In God's kingdom people are never a means to someone's economic agenda. People, rich and poor, need to be loved and served as belonging to God, for "the Lord is the maker of them all". Christian Rebecca Todd Peters writes a thought provoking book about the concern of Christian social ethics. It is entitled 'Escaping the Bond of Privilege'. She asks uncomfortable questions, proposing concrete actions. She says affluent First World Christians can learn and gain some idea of what it exactly takes for us to enjoy those 'everyday low prices' at the big box stores. What about those in Bangladesh and Thailand who work in inhuman conditions to get us T-shirts for \$4.99. How can we be generous in this regard, sharing our bread with the poor? How can we restructure our living so as not to sow injustice and perpetuate and exploit the poor in our world? (Sojourners, July, 2015, p. 44.)

One pastor challenges us with three questions. Seeing money as a spiritual force, he asks how did you get it? Did it involve injustice, cheating, oppression of the poor? What are you doing with it? Are you hoarding it? Exploiting others? Wasting it on needless luxuries? And probably the most important question that would lead to a conversation about the others, what is it doing to you?

We gather around a table of grace. Here we receive new eyes through which to view the world. In this world we naturally look up to the rich, beautiful and successful. As we share Christ's life we are

introduced to a new world of logic. Church Father, Irenaeus, notes that Jesus challenges us to look at the world with what he calls “grace-healed eyes”. I could have used those eyes that day riding in the backseat of the car. As the one who held the power, I could have been generous rather than exploitive in the situation and brought a piece of God’s justice and love.

It is best I leave you with the words of Saint Teresa of Avila; “Christ has no body but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion for the world is to look out; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now”.

That is what it means to find favoritism with God.