

Good Work

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Readings:

James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

I.

As a pastor attending meetings of denominational groups, you see it up close. From Rhode Island to North Carolina to Western New York, from Brazil to India, I've even seen it in local church and neighborhood meetings too. Over the years, I have learned that for people supposedly living by the Law of Love, we Christians can disagree as bitterly, and with as much vigor and wickedness, as any group of difficult people in the world.

I recently began to play with the idea that we need something to unite us. Something we can agree on. Now, listening to political leaders of all sorts, I discovered that nothing unites a crowd like a **common enemy**. I am playing a little bit here... but play along for a sec. Friends, it is with a sense of relief I have finally having found something we Christians can **all be against**. We need to take a clear stand. We need to be united ... **against partiality**.

Say what? What's **partiality**? When was the last time you heard a group of religious people gather to condemn this one? Partiality: it's the sin of favoring one person over another. Partiality: that's treating one group as better than another. Partiality: the willingness to take one part and push aside the rest. Partiality: Prejudice and the unfair use of power.

We can all see it's bad! Only problem is, this is one area that we can't just talk the talk, we need to walk the walk. And that has been an issue, a problem for quite a while—say two thousand years. It remains a problem. Just this morning in the newspaper, for example, was the stark contrast of how Middle Eastern refugees arriving in Europe have been treated. In Hungary, it has been, “Hungary for the Hungarians.” Entering Austria and Germany, it has been—at least for a day—a different story: toys and candy.

Our scripture passages today share glimpses into the **Church's** struggles in dealing with partiality in the earliest days. They struggled with wealth and privilege. And they struggled with race and religion.

From the Letter of James, a powerful little book: “Faith without works,” says the writer, “is dead.” Nor is the writer just talking about any kind of good work. The particular concern being addressed is how people treat each other in church, in the body of Christ—and specifically even when they gather together as a community for worship, as we do on Sunday mornings. The particular partiality in the churches James writes to is favoritism based on wealth. We catch an ugly snapshot of people who are wealthy being given better places at the table! Meanwhile, those dressed as though poor, while not turned away, are given spots to sit on the floor, gather on the edge, treated patronizingly and told...well they are being told just where to go.

This ancient writing in James holds us accountable to a new standard—basic human respect and radical welcome to rich and poor alike. That was the word to the churches two thousand years ago. The churches' failures ever since to address prejudice against the poor; Christian willingness to tolerate wealth based classism even in the church—every variety of church—are depressing. And yet the efforts to overcome it, over the millennia, have been, in places, momentarily inspiring as well. As a congregation we are surely trying to get it about this- When we mix and mingle on the last Saturday morning for brunch and when we gather for communion on the First Sunday. It shouldn't matter in God's house how much you make or where you live or what you wear! And on this Labor Day Sunday, it is a good thing to remind ourselves that since the earliest days Christianity has taught- we are all called to give up our partiality to the rich and prejudice against the poor, including the working poor.

II.

All of us struggle with partiality. To be “against it” and truly mean it, and give ourselves to something better, is a lifelong personal spiritual social journey, not just some quick fix. “Perhaps we can bring the day when children will learn from their earliest days that being fully man and fully woman means to give one's life to the liberation of the brother [or sister] who suffers.” Those are the words of Cesar Chavez, the great American farmworkers leader. It's not an overnight thing, not for most of us. This struggle is a lifelong pilgrimage of faith and mercy in our souls. And it is a slow process of redemption for us together—as followers of Christ.

Even Jesus had to grow. A Palestinian Jew of the first century on a mission to the poor of his own nation, even Jesus struggled with how to deal with foreigners. Our second reading gives us a second snapshot from a few years earlier—this one catching Jesus on a private trip to Tyre, outside the holy land. Invading his privacy, a Syro-

Phoenician woman, which is to say a non-Jewish local from the coast, probably fairly prosperous, pops in unexpectedly. She is there on serious business. Her little daughter is home sick, with what Mark calls a demon. What kind of a demon? Every disease in the world was called a Demon in those days. It doesn't say—could have been mental or physical illness. We just know she was down for the count. We find a desperate mother on the ground, begging a foreign healer for help.

The interaction between Jesus and his new acquaintance is shocking. He tells her that the food at the table needs to be given first to the hungry children, not tossed to the dogs. Dogs? We are talking about her *child* who is very very sick. Then this unnamed woman takes Jesus on—with a mix of humility and challenge. “Sir even the dogs get the crumbs from the children at the table.” Next, an even bigger surprise: Jesus thanks her for her words, her wisdom, and sends her home to a daughter who has been released from whatever spirit or illness had taken hold of her. Lesson: There is more wisdom in being able to hear and grow than there is being right in the first place.

There are some who point to this story and say that before this, Jesus was all about a mission just to the children of Israel, his own struggling people, particularly those around their edges. But after this, there is room at the Jesus table for anybody. I am not sure it is that sudden or clear. Jesus never abandoned the poor of his own people. And yet if there is anywhere in the story where something someone says changes the mind of Jesus, this is it. A pagan woman, desperate to heal her daughter, opens the heart and mind of the messiah.

Whatever happened back then, this is an important passage—we need to get it with this one today. A mother's love can overcome the divisions of race and ethnicity and history, and yes even wealth—for this woman may well have been wealthy, and Jesus had a ministry primarily with the poor. God's love for each of us is like that mother's love. That love can still overcome every kind of partiality.

III.

All of us struggle with this thing we are theoretically all against: partiality. It is easier to see the partiality of our neighbors than our own! Right? Blessedly, the gospel of divine mercy trumps even the partiality of the righteously indignant! And in the terrible moments when we come face to face with our own partiality, God can heal. God can lead us on a new journey.

We are about to come to the communion table! Almost all of us can acknowledge that if we had to be utterly impartial to be allowed here, equally loving of all human beings, of each and every one, we might never receive the cup, might never dare to reach for the bread. But the mercy of God extends even to us. And here at the table we meet

each other. We share what we have. We learn that we are indeed capable of being friends...despite all our differences, all our history. Hear Cesar Chavez, again. He once said: "If you really want to make a friend, go to someone's house and eat with him...The people who give you their food give you their heart."

The willingness of God to bring us to the table of love is inexhaustible. Whether we have spent our lives being looked down at or up to, still there is room at the table of grace. Whether we have spent our lives hated, or have never before admitted to the hatred we carry, still there is a place set—not crumbs knocked off by the chosen few under the table for the dogs, but a place set at the table- for you, for me, for everyone.

ALL God's children have a place at the welcome table. In the end that is what it comes down to—it isn't enough to be against things. Being against partiality kind of collapses under its own weight—until we understand that being *against* partiality means being radically ready to be *for* something too. It means being courageous enough to stand for hospitality, welcome, and yes, even the dangerous willingness to speak—and eat, and fall in love with—strangers. That's the good work. That's the labor of love. And we need all the help we can get, if we are to live FOR something like that. May God help us do the good work, the God work, to which Love invites us. And may we help each other, with mercy and with honesty and humility. May it begin right here, again, at this table, Christ's table, today.