

Feb. 12, 2017 **Deuteronomy 30:15-20; James 2:1-7; Matthew 5:43-48**

We heard the text read a moment ago from the Letter of James, chapter 2. Clearly, the writer of this letter is absolutely appalled at the preferential treatment being given to certain people who come into worship, who enter the sanctuary. One comes in wearing gold rings and a fine white toga – wearing an Armani suit, or carrying a Michael Kors handbag – and everyone jumps around and says, “Here, sit here. Get up; get out of your seat, let Mr. and Mrs. Smith sit here.” Then someone else comes in wearing rags, someone who is poor. “What are you doing, who let you in? Sit over there, there in the corner; behind the organ.”

The author of the Letter of James cannot believe that such distinctions are being made. He is absolutely flabbergasted that this kind of preferential treatment would be given in the house of God.

The people who are reading this letter, they know that what they are doing is against God’s law. And we know it as well; don’t we? “You shall show no preferential treatment, you shall make no distinctions between the rich and poor.” It’s clearly stated in the Book of Leviticus, chapter 19. (You are familiar with this chapter in Leviticus, aren’t you? The first readers of James’ letter would have known well this text.) It’s also found in the teachings of Jesus. (You are more familiar with these, right?) Here is what Jesus says...

You do not say to one person a pleasant word because that person spoke a pleasant word to you. You’re not generous to another because that person is generous to you. You’re not kind to someone because they are kind to you. In other words, Jesus says, you do not take the cues for your own behavior from the nature of that other person. Rather, you take your behaviour from the character of God who sends sun and rain on the just and unjust. Likewise, this is what you are called and sent by me to do. Make no distinction. Draw no comparisons. Show no

partiality. (It took the Apostle Paul a little while to figure this out; but, eventually, he did. And so he wrote to the Romans, telling them straight, that “With God there is no partiality.”)

When **I** read the Letter of James, I think to myself: “My goodness, how can these people do this? Why are they doing this? Diverging so from the teachings and example of Jesus. What could possess them to make distinctions on so flimsy a difference as economic status, say? As though identity, value and worth were tied to how much one can put on the offering plate. Good grief! How stupid can people get?”

I don’t know why these people, in that church addressed by the Letter of James, are making such distinctions. I mean, it’s against their law; it’s against the tradition; it’s against the community; it’s against the very nature of what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. But there’s no doubt that they’re doing it. That’s clear. Making distinctions. Showing partiality. “Oh, I’m sorry. My friend sits here.” ///

Now, some of you know that I tend to frequent a certain coffee shop. (Large; one cream, half a sugar; roll up the rim.) Well, the other day I commented to someone on how much things have changed since I first began going to that coffee shop 19 years ago. While I didn’t really notice it back then, now, as I look back I remembering how every person working behind the counter two decades ago was young, white-skinned, of European ancestry, and spoke with an accent that I could understand (Again, back then, I did not realize that both they and I did and do speak with an accent). Today, now, every person working behind that same counter has a skin colour in varying shades of brown and black. They run the gamut between young and old. In ancestry, they hail from every corner of the world. They speak to one another, and to me, in multiple accents. They’re occasional inability

to comprehend my words is a troubling reminder to me that I, too, speak in an accent and have always done so. So, just the other day I was telling someone all this; making comparisons, drawing distinctions between my coffee shop “back then,” and my country today.

In Leviticus, chapter 19.... yep, I want to drag you back there again..., you’ll find there this that the Bible says: “When an alien resides with you in your land....” (That’s the word the Bible uses here.) “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. (You shall not show partiality, make comparisons, or draw distinctions.) The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; says the Lord your God.”

You see, with God there is no partiality; no comparisons; no distinctions.

But perhaps, without realizing it, we are making those distinctions, comparisons, and showing partiality each and every day? Not just in church, where it’s exceedingly easy to caricature and poke fun at such behavior; but also, say, in the coffee shop that we frequent. Not just with strangers whom we tend to ignore and keep at bay anyway; but also, say, with our neighbours and co-workers, our friends and family members whom we see daily and with whom live. If those strangers act rudely toward us; or if this friend disrespects us, or that family member ticks us off royally, perhaps we feel justified in drawing distinctions, making comparisons, and showing a degree of partiality. Is it this way for you?

It is possible to let your ethics be determined by the other person, isn’t it? Your ethics or your morals can be determined by the other person. For example, there are some people you would never lie to; but there are some people you might lie to. There are some people you would never cheat; but there are some people you might cheat. Do you get what I mean? It is possible to let your ethics be

determined by the nature of the other person. We've all of us done it, haven't we? With strangers, among friends, in our family, we may be doing this right now.

Remember how Jesus tells his followers, "You are to love and to do good and to lend to people who will have absolutely no thanks for you, no gift in return, no positive response, no love for you, no kindness toward you. Why? Because that's the way God does things; that's the way God is. So if you want to be my follower, you do not let your life become dictated by the people around you. You do not say, 'She was nice to me; I'll be nice to her.' 'He lent me his snow-blower; I'll lend him my lawnmower.' 'She didn't return my phone call; I won't call her again until she phones me.' 'He was rude and unfriendly to me; well, two can play at that game.'"

Remember. To those who would be his followers, Jesus said:

"If you speak to those who speak to you, so what? Most everyone does that. If you're nice to those who are nice to you, well, that's no feather in your cap. If you invite those who invite you, big deal! If you're generous to those who are generous to you, what of it? You are to be as God is, don't you see, who gives the rain and the sun on the good and the bad, the just and the unjust alike. Why? Because God is love. And love does not react to anybody and say, 'Well. If you're going to be like that, then, the heck with you.' No. God is God. And God acts out of God's own character, which is love. And this is the way that you are to be. And this is the way that you are to act.

"Your life, your behavior, your relationships are not to be determined by other people. You are to share with others the good news of God's presence and God's love; whether they accept your message or reject it. How they respond is not your business. Leave that to God. You are to be the good news. You are to be children of God."

This, for me at least, is likely the most difficult of Jesus' teachings: "Do not react to anybody's behavior, but act out of your own character as a child of God. For God is kind, even to the ungrateful and selfish."

Have you ever tried to justify to yourself some unkind word or deed you'd directed toward another human being? Have you ever said to yourself, 'Well, they deserved it.' 'They had it coming.' 'They got as good as they gave, and better.'

Me too. So, occasionally, I will turn to the Bible and see if I can find a verse or two that will provide me with scriptural support for my having reacted to unkindness with unkindness. You know, I'm still looking. I can't seem to find such a verse; not a single verse. However, again and again, I keep stumbling upon these words of Jesus': "Be gracious, even as God is gracious."

So. I don't know. What are you going to do?!

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