

**September 8, 2024**

**Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost**

**James 2:1-17 (NRSV)**

**pg. 229, NT Pew Bible**

<sup>1</sup>My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? <sup>2</sup>For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, <sup>3</sup>and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," <sup>4</sup>have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? <sup>5</sup>Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. 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? <sup>6</sup>But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? <sup>7</sup>Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

<sup>8</sup>You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>9</sup>But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. <sup>10</sup>For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. <sup>11</sup>For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. <sup>12</sup>So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. <sup>13</sup>For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy, mercy triumphs over judgment.

<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...

## Without Distinction

Rev. Jason Coker, pastor of Wilton Baptist Church in Wilton, Connecticut relates this story, one that resonates greatly in my own soul. Coker shares: “After a long day of taking Christmas dinner to homeless people on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, I just wanted to go into my office and start working on my to-do list! Well, that morning my sermon was at the top of the list. In preparation, I was reading a book by Taylor Field, the pastor of East 7<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church. The upcoming sermon was on love, so I thought that this book might offer some insight on Taylor’s love for the people of the Lower East Side, the very place we were serving Christmas dinner the night before.

I was thinking about how cool a guy Taylor was when my secretary interrupted me and told me that Ernesto was here. I didn’t put down the book; rather, I had to think whether I was going to let Ernesto into my office. He was somewhat of a regular benevolence issue; one of those needy people who keeps coming back, looking for more and more help. I had just helped him with some groceries, and I really needed to work on my sermon—so I was wondering if I should just say I didn’t have time to talk! He always eats up at least an hour of my time. After a big sigh, I shrugged my shoulders, put down my book, and told Mary to send him in.

Ernesto walked into my office very humbly like he always does. After our exchange of greetings, he holds out a Christmas gift bag and tells me to open it. He said that his family back in El Salvador makes these belts and he wanted me to have one for Christmas. There was an excitement in his eyes that I’ve never seen before. It was his turn to offer something to me and he was beside himself with joy. Instead of spending an hour helping Ernesto, Ernesto spent fifteen minutes helping me. The irony of my being bothered by a “chronic benevolence case” while writing a sermon on love wasn’t lost on me! Ernesto had other folks to bless so he walked out of the church doors and into the cold December air to deliver a gift to another unsuspecting ‘care giver.’ He left me in my warm office pontificating about what kind of jerk I was.” Coker concludes his story with these words: “May God have mercy on us both, but especially Ernesto.

We could easily paraphrase our Scripture reading this morning into a command: "My sisters and brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism." When we play favorites, writes James, we "discriminate and become judges." And when we judge, we've ultimately put ourselves in the place of God, which is essentially idolatry. We judge, discriminate, and play favorites for many reasons—race, religion, gender, intelligence, politics, and nationality all come to mind. This morning's text, in particular, uses the example of Christians who favored the rich over the poor. James reminds us that this way of "being church" regards people as the world regards people, not as God regards people. And if there is any place in the world where people, regardless of societal stature, are all supposed to be celebrated as sons and daughters of God, created in the Image of God...it's the church. We are supposed to take *that* way of being and sell it to the world. But, instead, the church to whom James was writing had bought into the world's way of doing things. Garry Wills sums it up perfectly in his book *What Jesus Meant*. God in God's lavish and indiscriminate love never excludes people because they are unclean, unworthy, or disrespectable. And neither should we. "No outcasts," says Wills, "were cast out far enough in Jesus' world to make him shun them."

But playing favorites is so easy; and loving indiscriminately is so difficult! Will Campbell found this out the hard way. In his two memoirs *Forty Acres and a Goat* and *Brother to a Dragonfly* he describes his own experience of learning to love without limits. Campbell was born and raised in the rural and very poor deep American south of Amite, Mississippi. He was "ordained" by family members at a local Baptist church when he was seventeen, and, in a delightfully improbable life, played a central role as an activist and agitator on behalf of African Americans. But to leave it at that would greatly misrepresent his story.

After serving in World War II, Campbell studied at Tulane, Wake Forest, and Yale. After a short stint as a pastor in Louisiana, he served as Director of Religious life at the University of Mississippi but left after two years because his controversial views on race attracted death threats. He then did a stint for the National Council of Churches, working with most of the civil rights luminaries. In 1957, for example, Campbell was one of four people who escorted the nine black students

who integrated Little Rock's Central High School; and he was the only white person to attend the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. The hate mail from white conservatives poured in.

As he matured, however, Campbell had the uneasy feeling that he hated those to whom he referred as the redneck bigots who perpetuated hate. He discovered how easy it was to play favorites and to oppress the oppressors. Strange, he thought, how much he enjoyed thinking that God hated all the same people that he hated. He realized that he had created God in his own image, and after his own personal and political likeness. Through a series of encounters with unlikely "teachers," Campbell came to admit that after twenty years in ministry he had become little more than a "doctrinaire social activist," which he considered different than being a follower of Jesus. "I came to understand the nature of tragedy. And one who understands the nature of tragedy can never take sides." Campbell saw how he had played favorites and taken sides; he had subverted the indiscriminate love of God for all people without conditions, limits, or exceptions into a ministry of what he called "liberal sophistication."

Acting upon these convictions, he started sipping whiskey with the Ku Klux Klan. He officiated at their funerals and weddings, and even befriended the Grand Dragon of North Carolina, J.R. "Bob" Jones. When they were sick, he emptied their bed pans. And then the hate mail poured in from the liberal left. In a 1976 interview for an oral history that he gave to the University of Southern Mississippi, he joked, "It's been a long time since I got a hate letter from the right. Now they come from the left." Since God doesn't play favorites, Campbell concluded, neither should he.

The necessary connection between claiming to love God and proving that we love our fellow human beings became so embedded in the early Christian traditions that this teaching is repeated almost verbatim by the apostle Paul in Galatians 5:14—"For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' and in the First Letter of John 4:20-21: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his

brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

Noted preacher and author, Fred Craddock tells the story of a missionary sent to preach the gospel in India just after the end of World War II. After many months the time came for a furlough back home. His church wired him the money to book passage on a steamer but when he got to the port city, he discovered a boat load of Jews had just been allowed to land temporarily. It was a time when European Jews were literally sailing all over the world looking for a place to live, and these particular Jews were staying in attics and warehouses and basements all over that port city.

It happened to be Christmas, and on Christmas morning, this missionary went to one of the attics where scores of Jews were staying. He walked in and said, “Merry Christmas.” The people looked at him like he was crazy and responded, “We're Jews.” “I know that.” said the missionary, but he continued, asking them, “What would you like for Christmas?” In utter amazement the Jews responded, “Why we'd like pastries, good pastries like the ones we used to have in Germany.” So, the missionary went out and used the money for his ticket home to buy pastries for all the Jews he could find staying in the port. Of course, then he had to wire home asking for more money to book his passage back to the States.

As you might expect, his superiors wired back asking what happened to the money they had already sent. He wired that he had used it to buy Christmas pastries for some Jews. His superiors wired back, “Why did you do that? They don't even believe in Jesus.” He wired back: “Yes, but I do.”

## **Prayers of the People**

O God, we thank you this day for people

who seek to live out their faith in their everyday lives.

We know that we cannot earn your love, but we can respond to your love.

You call us to live holy lives out of gratitude for all that you have done for us.

We thank you for people who find joy amid trials and difficulties:

for the hospital patient who gives hope and inspiration to the visitor,

for the unhoused person who teaches the social worker the meaning of faith,

for the family that prays together in the face of death.

We thank you for those who endure temptation:

for the young person who says “no” to a friend who wants to shoplift,

for the office worker who refuses to join in negative conversation,

for the company executive who puts people before profits.

We thank you for those who are ever generous in giving to others:

for the child who puts her allowance in the church’s mission offering,

for the young adult at a first job who dares to tithe his new income,

for the neighbor who gets up at four in the morning

to shovel his elderly neighbor’s sidewalk.

We thank you for those who are quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger:

for couples who listen to each other in love,

for people who count to ten before speaking their minds and then speak gently,

for people who remain calm and loving when others’ tempers flare.

We thank you for people who live out their faith by caring for orphans,

widows, and others in need:

for foster parents and adoptive parents,

for those who seek to work for peace and justice

so that fewer people will be orphaned and widowed,

for those who share a cup of coffee with a lonely neighbor,  
for those who visit nursing homes and care facilities,  
for those who distribute books and provide meals to children in need,  
for those who reach out with mercy to persons who are incarcerated,  
for those who spend time with persons recovering from addiction,  
for those who tenaciously work to improve the lives of the neurodivergent.

As we offer you our prayers,

help us to lift to you those whom we have named before you this day,  
not only with our voices, but also in our hearts.

May we be found faithful in praying for them and then making ourselves available  
to being conduits of your redemptive love to them.

We, who have endured tragedy in our own community, deeply grieve for the  
families of those killed in the senseless violence at Apalachee High School in  
Georgia and for that entire community that finds itself in shock and sadness.  
Bring comfort and hope into their darkness. Embrace them with your love and  
remind them that your love is so much stronger than hatred and resentment.  
Lord, have mercy on our nation's children...and help us to teach them that love,  
not violence, is the answer.

We thank you, O God, for people who are doers of the word and not hearers only.

May we be counted among those who are merciful, those willing to  
engage persons who speak other languages, or have different levels of  
melatonin in their skin, or who don't share the same hygiene habits that we do, or  
who have no place to lay their head other than a park bench, or who worship  
differently than we do, or whose customs seem strange to us, or who don't

conform to our pre-conceived notions of polite society, or whose tattoos or body piercings are off-putting, and even, especially even, those who may be voting for a different candidate than we are.

Help us to hear your word and to find joy in doing what you call us to do.

May we live our lives in thankful obedience. Amen.

### **Commission & Benediction**

The great Catholic community worker Dorothy Day once said, "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least."

Go now and invest your lives in the works of faith.

Allow generosity and compassion to be your focus.

Fulfill God's holy law by putting love into action as eagerly for others as you would for yourselves.

And may God be your defender and provider;

May Christ Jesus dispel all that disturbs or restricts you;

and may the Holy Spirit make you rich in faith and loving and merciful in action.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **Amen.**