

## Front Row Seats

James 2:1-17

Last week James gave us homework – we were supposed to go home and take stock of our lives. He told us to take a good look in the mirror, and take careful note of what we saw there. Now, I'm not going to collect your homework and grade it, but you will need it this morning, so if you did your assignment, go ahead and bring that to the forefront of your minds now.

If you weren't here last week, I'll give you a quick review. What we said was that James was one of those difficult books to study and preach on because he tells us that our behavior matters. If you are going to go around the world calling yourself a Christian it isn't enough just to say that you believe in Jesus; you have to live like you believe in Jesus, too. And he gets very specific about what is expected of us. Uncomfortably specific. But before he starts in on us he does something that at first seems tangential. He reminds us who God is, and what God has done for us. And the way he identifies God is as the giver of gifts, all good gifts. That's when he tells us to go home and take a good look in the mirror; take a good look at our lives and see what those gifts are. Mostly he'd like us to see that God has given us the gift of life. But whatever you see in the mirror, that will determine how you hear everything else that James has to say to us. Badgering and threatening, or exhortation; gospel, good news.

Okay, so we've done our homework, we've reflected on who God is and everything that God has done for us, how God has saved us. Now James is ready to lay into us. Remember that this is a letter that was sent out to all the churches scattered around the world. Back then it would have arrived by messenger, today it would probably arrive as email, maybe in Evelyn Kemp's inbox since she's the clerk of session and official correspondence to the church goes to her. But it would have been addressed to all of us, so either she or I would read it out loud to the congregation during worship. And here's what it would have said: "Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I have heard something troubling about your congregation. I've heard that when someone pulls into the parking lot in their Mercedes and expensive suits, your obsequious, fawning ushers fall all over themselves to give that person the very best seat in your sanctuary (which I also understand are in the back of the church, not in the front, which I find unusual). The ushers bring them coffee and doughnuts, and are careful to seat them where the lighting is good and the vents won't blow cold air on them. But when someone in a beat up old car and thrift store clothes comes to worship with you, he is told he can sit in the library and listen through the crack in the door, or worse, he is made to sit in the front row, right in front of the pulpit!

How can you call yourselves Christians when you show favoritism like that? Do you not remember how kindly Jesus treated the poor and needy? Or Mary's Magnificat, how God will lift up the poor and scatter the proud and mighty? Or Luke's beatitudes? Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Or all the Old Testament verses about how God cares for the poor? Do you not remember that Jesus himself was poor?"

And of course, at that point we would all breathe a collective sigh of relief, because it isn't us James is going after. We're just one of many churches on his distribution list, and apparently one of them, or a bunch of them, were pandering to the wealthy in their midst in some pretty

outrageous ways. We're probably guilty of some of the other things James will get to in his letter, but not this one. In fact, we don't even have any people like that in our congregation, no one in cast off clothes or smelling like they've been living out in the woods. For this week, at least, we are off the hook, so what we will do is have the session direct Evelyn to fire a quick note off to James, letting him know that, on this account at least, we are innocent.

Unfortunately, with his Blackberry and 3G network, James fires a note back almost immediately: "why don't you have 'people like that' in your congregation? What is it about you that makes them feel unwelcome? And don't tell me they wouldn't feel comfortable there anyway – why wouldn't they? What are you doing that makes them feel different, like they don't belong there? Aren't they your brothers and sisters in Christ too? Isn't the body of Christ and the kingdom of God made up of all kinds of people, rich, poor, young, old, educated and uneducated?" (You can say things like that and get away with it if you are an itinerant evangelist or apostle, writing from a safe distance and when you're not dependent on them for your livelihood!)

Unfortunately, that is only his first paragraph. "And what about when you are driving down Roan Street headed downtown? When you pass all those people standing around Melting Pot and the John Sevier center do you just drive by them without a second glance or thought? Do you pass them on the sidewalk and tell them to 'have a nice day'?"

Looks like James might be talking about us after all.

What James wants us to see is that, even if we aren't guilty of favoritism, we are guilty of indifference. It doesn't work to say that we aren't guilty of treating them poorly because we hardly ever run across anyone like that. We hardly ever run across anyone like that because we don't want to. We buy houses and shop and choose churches and schools to make sure that we don't. Their need annoys us. It makes us uncomfortable. It no longer touches us deeply, if it ever did. We manage to live quite comfortably with the awareness that there are people out there who had their power turned off three months ago, or don't have enough to eat or a place to sleep. We pray generically for the poor, and then go about our business.

James says something peculiar in verse one. He says, "Do you, with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Jesus Christ?" The word, "believe" kind of throws you off in that sentence. How does whether or not they believe have anything to do with favoritism? What he wants us to understand is that there are some things you can believe in and it doesn't make a difference in how you live. I can believe the world is flat and be utterly convinced that Big Foot is alive and well in the Andes Mountains and it won't make a dime's worth of difference in how I live my life. But my belief in other things will affect how I go about my life. If I believe that fruits and vegetables are good for me and processed sugar isn't, then that should shape my behavior, my eating habits, shouldn't it?

And if I believe in Jesus, if I believe that he was more than just a great teacher and example, then my life looks different. The way I live my life looks different. How can I say I believe in the God who heard the cries of the Israelites in Egypt and saved them, and believe that all people need to do is show a little initiative and effort and they wouldn't have to live like that anymore? How can I say I believe in Jesus, who spent his life caring for the outcast and the poor, and

surround myself only with people just like me, telling myself that people who were poor and uneducated would just feel uncomfortable here anyway? When James talks about faith, he doesn't mean just what we believe. He means that what we believe shapes our lives.

Remember that exercise James gave us last week? Looking in the mirror and taking stock of our lives? Seeing where and how God has given us gifts, the gift of life? This is where that comes in. If God gave us life in Jesus, then faith in Jesus means extending life to others. Hopefully that long, hard look in the mirror has shown us that we haven't gotten where we are in life all on our own. God has given us everything that we have and everything that we've needed to be well educated, well employed and well off –and yes, friends, despite the setbacks we've all experienced this year, you and I are very well off. God has given us the intelligence, the opportunity, the family support, the drive. Everything. This has all been a gift. God has been compassionate and generous and loving to us. And God expects that we will be compassionate and generous and loving to others.

And here's the truly uncomfortable part, the part that the lectionary tried to cut out – following this part of the Law, caring for the needy, welcoming the stranger and the poor, is every bit as vital as the parts about not committing murder or adultery. We can't be smug about not cheating on our spouses or robbing the Circle K if we are indifferent to the needs of the poor. It's all part of loving your neighbor.

So what do you believe? That's really what James is asking us in his letter. What beliefs do you act on in your life? What beliefs shape your life? Belief in Jesus, belief in a God of love and compassion, or something else?