

Calvary United Methodist Church
September 16, 2018

HOSPITALITY
Rev. Dr. Robert Cook

Message:

James 2:1-13

The passage we heard from James chapter 2 is asking vital questions of us. James asks these questions of believers, no doubt faithful and sincere, but he has observed otherwise. He sees that they will show partiality to the well-heeled, well-to-do and well-connected. James also has seen how others were looked down upon or ignored because of their social position or because of the poverty, status and roles in society. But the Church--*the living body of Christ*-- is supposed to be better than that. **The Church is supposed to model how Jesus treated others with the hospitality of God.** So, James is asking: *How does what you believe about Jesus shape your daily living? In what ways is our practice of faith too small and narrow?* In our day, we would ask: *What would Jesus do?*

James is a practical-thinking pastor. He sees how easy it is for Christian believers to take the soul of the faith and reduce it down to a few statements of belief. But their beliefs were not reflected in their daily living. Something else was shaping their life; but it wasn't Jesus.

James focused in on how the Church people treated the wealthy and well-heeled. It is a common human thing to defer to the wealthy and powerful while showing disdain and disrespect for the common, or lower classes. James knew where this was coming from. The way of the world is to defer to the rich and powerful but show disregard for the lower classes. **This was certainly not what Jesus had taught or shown by example.**

There's a fancy term for this: it's called **cognitive dissonance**. It's like singing a beautiful song horribly off-key. The regular every day term is that your walk does not match up to your talk. I shared this story in Friday's email blast. It has meant much to me since I knew the man very well. Gary was a college student who had arrived there fresh from the army and from war. He had been a combat medic. It was through his experiences in a war zone that he came to faith and made a deep Christian commitment. After his honorable discharge he used his military benefits to go to school.

At his college they had many service opportunities. So he volunteered to go with a group that would go out on Friday and Saturday nights and bring sandwiches, clothes and blankets to the homeless. He drove a school van filled with kids 18-19 years old who would not understand; so he never mentioned his army experiences. He was fine with organizing the younger students, driving the van, handing out sandwiches and cups of hot coffee, offering warm coats and blankets to the people they met in streets of the city.

One evening, as he handed out coffee, sandwiches, coats and blankets, a homeless woman with a big, vibrant personality embraced Gary in a huge hug and planted a big kiss on his cheek. This

shocked him and he quickly pulled away. He was embarrassed before the other students who made light of it. But that encounter really troubled him. Finally, he went off by himself to sort it out. After several days and deep prayer, he felt the voice of Jesus speaking to his soul, saying, "*The way that woman was before you is how I could see you, too. I did not turn away from you; I stretched out my arms to you because I love you that much. In love for you I took your shame and your pain and even your sin into myself.*"

Gary continued going out on those cold Friday and Saturday nights. He continued to hand out sandwiches, hot coffee, warm coats and blankets, but with this difference: ***he began to love the people he met and looked upon them as God's beloved children.*** He never again saw the woman who had thanked him with that huge hug and kiss, though he looked for her face in the faces of the people he met. **He knew that he would see Jesus in her face. Through a nameless, homeless woman, he learned to see Jesus in every face.**

When Gary shared that story with me, I first thought of ways in which I fall short of the mark. But then, Gary's experience helped me to see Jesus and what Jesus has done for us more clearly. Jesus was sent by God into this world he made but a world that rejected God. "***He came to his own,***" the Gospel of John says, "***but his own received him not.***" Jesus was not turned off by us. He did not write us off or call down judgment from the heavens. It must have troubled him beyond words that creatures made in the moral image of God could so easily go wrong. It wounded his very soul to see where greed, prejudice, narrowness and bigotry led to injustices, violence, murders and even genocide. This and so much more Jesus took into himself, bearing it all out of love for God. He died our death, forgiving even those who crucified him. **And to those who believe in him, he gives life—God's kind of life.**

I believe in the resurrection. I believe in it because it is God's great reversal of not only the unjust human sentence meted out to Jesus on the cross; the resurrection was also God's reversal of the powers of evil, darkness and death. In the resurrection, goodness is proved stronger than evil, light overcomes darkness; love triumphs over hate and life is stronger than the power of death. In rising from the dead, Jesus met us with open arms of grace, forgiveness and acceptance. He continues to meet us right where we are. For in Jesus God demonstrated that we did not go to God; in Jesus God came to us. That is proof that God loves you; it is proof that God loves us all. No exceptions.

Gary's experience speaks to me about caring for those around me--especially those who are the least or the last. ***It's not my first nature to do this; but it is in the new nature Jesus gives to me and you by the Spirit.*** We who follow Jesus are to learn from him so that we may do as he did. **Let me suggest that the place to begin is right here in this sanctuary.** Here is where we break down the walls of division and seek reconciliation. As we are open to the Spirit of Jesus, he will lead us to be the first to seek reconciliation and to make amends. We don't wait for others to be the first.

As we seek to be reconciled, we can live in charity together. We will see that the mission of Jesus we are called to is far more important than holding on to our ego needs, our slights or wounds oth-

ers inflicted. In fact, we will be given the gift of unity of heart and purpose as his people. And as we simply do that, and see one another, our guests and visitors as beloved of God together, then we will have something worth sharing beyond these doors.

But if we won't do that; if we nurse our grudges, hold on to our prejudices and treat with partiality those we esteem while denigrating those we care nothing for, we have nothing to offer inside the building or out in the community. Nor do we have a right to be called Christian--Christ followers.

Jesus spoke to Gary saying, *“The way that woman was before you is how I could see you, too. But I took your shame and your pain and even your sin into myself. I did not turn away from you; I stretched out my arms to you because I love you that much.* And so Jesus does love you just as he loves everyone can see. No exceptions.

May the hospitality of God in Christ be expressed in you and through you both here—and everywhere. Amen.