

“Radical Hospitality” James 2:1-17 Rev. Michele Ward
15th Sunday After Pentecost September 5, 2020
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

James is back this week with another searing reminder about what it means to be a person of faith and action. Rather than a lesson about how our inner world manifests itself in the way we live, James is here to tell us that our faith is as good as dead without actions to back it up. And to illustrate his point, he uses the example of favoritism to solidify his claims.

In the first chapter, James tells us that faithfulness to God means we reflect God’s character in the way that we live. Life apart from God is subject to our whims and desires, whereas life with God is subject to living as God would have us live. James uses the example of caring for widows and orphans and preference for the poor in the community as examples of this kind of faithful living. If they are true Christians, James argues, their values will be on display consistently in the way they act.

In the second chapter, James takes it to the next level. He wants his readers to understand that they might agree with him in theory, but not in practice. So he makes it personal. He asks them, what happens if a poor person walks into your congregation? When a wealthy person wearing fine jewelry and designer clothes visits our church, do we treat them as more important than the poor person in dirty clothes? James has a hunch that his readers are more likely to give the well dressed person a better seat in the sanctuary and tuck the poor person away into a corner or in the back.

That kind of behavior does not sit well with James. It does not line up with what he describes as living the life of faith looks like in his argument

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about faith and actions matching up. He boldly claims in verse 5, “God [has] chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom.” He acknowledges how easy it is to play favorites with people who are more like us--closer to our social status or our financial circumstances--rather than to attend to people whose suffering reveals how close we may be to their situation. James argues that this is lukewarm faith--a kind of faith that gives in to the temptation to “be comfortable, to be upwardly mobile, to experience only life’s ups, and to be insulated from life’s downs.”¹ Authentic faith requires that we step out of these temptations to comfort, according to James. It looks like tending to the widows and the orphans, to the wounded and down and out, to the naked and the hungry.

This kind of life is counterintuitive for most people. No one wants to be poor. No one wants to be cut off from resources or isolated from opportunity. No one wants to be referred to as downtrodden or in need of help. No one seeks out this kind of life unless they have been overwhelmed by the circumstances of their life. No one wants their body to display the suffering and As commentator A. K. M. Adam of Oxford writes, “this face of one who has known sorrows ... is our birthright.”² James goes on to say the law of the kingdom of

¹ A.K.M. Adam, “Commentary on James 2: 1-10, [11-13], 14-17” Published September 6, 2015. Accessed September 2, 2021.
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-2/commentary-on-james-21-10-11-13-14-17-4>

² A.K.M. Adam, “Commentary on James 2: 1-10, [11-13], 14-17” Published September 6, 2015. Accessed September 2, 2021.
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God commands us to love our neighbor and that the poor will inherit this

kingdom. He refers to the poor as the heirs of this kingdom, and sees them as God sees them--as royalty who deserve places of honor rather than places of disregard both in this world and in the world to come.

I served a church in Center City, Philadelphia before coming to Brown. They exemplified James’s insistence on hospitality to the poor and disregarded. A church with only 8 members left in 2002, the presbytery of Philadelphia closed the church and began renting out the building to the University of the Arts for rehearsal and performance space. Two years later a young Presbyterian pastor asked if he could try to revive the congregation and start a new church in the building. He and his team started with dinner. They passed out invitations to anyone and everyone they saw on the streets--business people, bike messengers, students, artists. And people from all walks of life began showing up for dinner, but not the ones they were expecting. Returning citizens, people sleeping in the subways, addicts in all stages of recovery, people with active mental illness, trauma survivors--all showing up for a meal and community.

In fact, so many people began showing up for dinner that they tore the pews out of their 800-seat sanctuary to make room for tables, and turned the sanctuary into a free restaurant seven meals a week. They sold some of their organ pipes to a cathedral in Germany so they could keep the church going. And they started worshipping backwards and replaced the pews with chairs. They turned the chairs to face the back of the sanctuary so they faced the city

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whenever they sang, took communion, prayed, or listened to a sermon. They

believed and practiced what James said--that anyone walking inside the church building deserved a place of honor, and there was a seat at the table for every single person. They believed and practiced the radical hospitality that James described for us this morning--the kind of hospitality that looks upon someone as a child of God before taking in their status or the circumstances of their lives.

James believes that a faith with integrity does not sidle up to privilege or turn away from the needs of others. He argues convincingly that unless faith is married to action it is not faith at all. We are baptized into grace so we can extend that grace to others throughout our lives, not hoard it for our own gain. Adam says accurately, “Faith involves more than affirming theological formulas, but a thorough reorientation of one’s life. Faith makes a difference in us.”³ And not only that, faith sees life where others see death. Where the presbytery leadership in Philadelphia saw rental income in an old church building, a pastor saw the opportunity to minister to all sorts of people in a new way. Where others saw an empty sanctuary with little to no worshippers, others saw community over dinner. Where others may expect people standing in line to receive handouts, others saw tables where everyone sat down as

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equals. Where PhDs and felons share dinner together is the kingdom of heaven, according to this church in Philadelphia. And according to James, too.

This kind of faith--this radical, open-hearted, hospitality-filled faith--is the kind that God commands of us. We are all vulnerable, if we are honest with ourselves. God chose those who are more visibly vulnerable than others to embody the good news of the gospel. If we have the eyes to see this, the ears to hear this, the hearts to receive this, we will not be the same. The faith that lives within, the faith we practice, and the people we encounter will transform us, one radical act of hospitality at a time.