

# “God’s Favorites Have No Favorites”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – September 5, 2021

James 2:1-17

A man and 24 of his friends and family and were refused service at a restaurant in Charleston, South Carolina. The reason: Michael Brown and his group are African American. Apparently, another customer - a white woman - complained that she felt threatened by their presence, and Brown and his entourage got the boot. No, this snub didn't take place 50 years ago when Martin Luther King and others were fighting for racial equality; it happened in 2019. That kind of discrimination would never happen here, would it? It certainly would never occur in our congregation, right? Before you answer those questions with an emphatic “No!” consider how the Apostle James had to remind Christians 2,000 years ago that God's favorites have no favorites. The Holy Spirit wants us to learn that those who claim to be believers in the true God will show genuine love to all people regardless of their economic status or race. Indifference about our failure to do this invites God's eternal anger.

Listen again to how James begins our sermon text. “MY BROTHERS, AS BELIEVERS IN OUR GLORIOUS LORD JESUS CHRIST, DON'T SHOW FAVORITISM. SUPPOSE A MAN COMES INTO YOUR MEETING WEARING A GOLD RING AND FINE CLOTHES, AND A POOR MAN IN SHABBY CLOTHES ALSO COMES IN. IF YOU SHOW SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE MAN WEARING FINE CLOTHES AND SAY, “HERE'S A GOOD SEAT FOR YOU,” BUT SAY TO THE POOR MAN, “YOU STAND THERE” OR “SIT ON THE FLOOR BY MY FEET,” HAVE YOU NOT DISCRIMINATED AMONG YOURSELVES AND BECOME JUDGES WITH EVIL THOUGHTS?” (*James 2:1-4*)

According to James, members of the early church struggled with the sin of discrimination. We're not talking Ku Klux Klan-type of discrimination where they were barring certain kinds of people from their congregations. It was a more subtle prejudice. If an obviously wealthy person attended the service, the members would fawn over the individual and direct him to

a seat of honor. Someone would perhaps run and get him a coffee while another introduced him to the pastor. There would be smiles all around. But if a homeless person walked through their doors, there would be a moment of inaction as members would glance at each other to see who was going to dispatch the “interloper.”

James says that such discrimination is motivated by “EVIL THOUGHTS” - evil not just because the poor person was treated like dirt, but evil because the rich individual was seen as a gold mine, an object to exploit rather than a sinner to serve. Do James’ words hit close to home? When we think of the kind of people, we want to join First Presbyterian, don’t we pray for a few millionaires? Or maybe a few well-connected members would also boost our congregation’s standing in the community. I’d love to be known as the pastor of the county’s movers and shakers.

Like us, the Christians of James’ day were more eager to welcome the rich and powerful than the poor. The irony was that it was the rich who were exploiting these Christians. So why were the members so eager to please them? The fact is God delights in showering the poor and the down-and-out of this world with the riches of faith. It is often the shut-in and the retiree, not the high-powered CEO, from whom we can learn the most about what it means to express and exercise humble faith in Jesus, more times than not.

But we shouldn’t think James is saying that anyone who is rich is exploitable. To assume that is to become judgmental in another way, just as I discriminate if I look at the car you drive and the vacations you take and assume that you can do this because you’re not a generous giver to the Lord. Such an attitude can only be prompted by thoughts of jealousy and covetousness. Instead of being happy for you, I find it easier to condemn you and pat myself on the back for my supposed super-righteousness. This is the sin that James is warning us against.

Ah, but so what if we harbor thoughts of discrimination? It’s not like we’re hurting anyone the way a gangster might. James anticipated that kind of response and so he wrote: “IF YOU REALLY KEEP THE ROYAL LAW FOUND IN SCRIPTURE, “LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” YOU ARE DOING

RIGHT. BUT IF YOU SHOW FAVORITISM, YOU SIN AND ARE CONVICTED BY THE LAW AS LAWBREAKERS. FOR WHOEVER KEEPS THE WHOLE LAW AND YET STUMBLES AT JUST ONE POINT IS GUILTY OF BREAKING ALL OF IT. FOR HE WHO SAID, “DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,” ALSO SAID, “DO NOT MURDER.” IF YOU DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY BUT DO COMMIT MURDER, YOU HAVE BECOME A LAWBREAKER” (*James 2:8-11*).

What James is saying is that no one would dare make the claim that, because they haven't murdered, they're free to cheat on their spouse. No, God wants us to keep all His commands, not just some of them. So don't discriminate! It's a sin that God takes seriously and so should we. We show Christian love because God's favorites have no favorites.

Today, we celebrate a special part of the service that is truly free of discrimination. When we come to the Lord's Supper, it is not what we do, but what has been done for us. It is God's grace shining through for all. It is not for the rich, it is not for the powerful, it is not for the good looking. It is for the people of God. Now in some churches, they have made rules on who can take it and they enforce the rules like they are God's bodyguards. They openly discriminate by saying things like you first must understand what it means, you must be part of our congregation, you have to be in good standing with bishop, pastor, or the church budget. But not here. Communion is for everyone, no matter your background, no matter how good or bad you see yourself, no matter what you believe about God because God believes in you. We trust that the power of the Holy Spirit is more powerful than any of our rules, more powerful than our restrictions, and more powerful than our prejudices. Our table is truly open to one and to all who wish to come before God and sit at God's table and take the bread and juice of everlasting life.

But now let me turn your attention back to our sermon theme: God's favorites have no favorites. Do the first two words of that theme make you uncomfortable? How can God have favorites? He does. I'm His favorite... and so are you. This is a profound truth about God. He loves me and He loves you as if we're the only people in the world to love. That's the truth that baptism and the Lord's Supper highlight. In the sacraments God

comes to us individually and speaks to us of His undying love, grace, and forgiveness – won for us by the death of His beloved Son, Jesus.

And why should God love us like this? It isn't because we deserve His love. I'm the discriminator that James speaks against in our text. I discriminate when I fervently pray for certain people on our prayer list while rarely thinking about the others. I can't drive down the road without discriminating as I look at the way people dress and the cars they drive and make judgments about them. Do you also struggle with the sin of discrimination? I'm sure you do. So why does God love us? Because He doesn't want us to die in these sins. That's why He sent Jesus to take our place.

But since Jesus earned this forgiveness for all people, we can say that God's favorites (believers in Jesus) have no favorites. There isn't a person you'll meet for whom Jesus didn't die. There isn't a life in this world that isn't precious to God. That means that this church is not just for us. It's for everyone regardless of race, economic status, or football allegiance for that matter! That truth means that we will be friendly to everyone who walks through these doors – no matter what past encounters you may have had with them. God's favorites have no favorites because Jesus' blood does not discriminate; it has forgiven all of our sins and all the sins of everyone else in this world. May God help us proclaim this truth not just in sermons but also in our actions. Amen.