

“The Church, The Rich And The Poor”

James 2:1-10;14-17

Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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“My brothers and sisters, if a person with gold rings and with fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you say to the one in fine clothes, ‘Have a seat here please,’ while to the other who is poor you say, ‘Stand there, or sit at my feet,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves...?” (James 2:1-4)

Let’s be honest, our natural impulse is to show hospitality to our “betters” probably because the rich man has something to give us, while the poor man has nothing we could possibly want.

Wouldn’t it be great if one of the big name Raven football players came to Babcock one Sunday morning? What a catch, especially if he was interested in membership. Our treasurer would be calculating his 10% tithe. Our Session would be wondering if we might attract several more Ravens to our church family, maybe word would spread through the Loch Raven community, we have a real celebrity in our building on Sunday mornings, and they’d start coming, and maybe they’d join too. Think of the possibilities!

On the other hand, if a poor man said, “I want to become a member,” certainly we’d still say, “Welcome aboard,” but would he be welcomed with the same enthusiasm as Joe Flacco? I don’t think so. Why? Human nature. We show favoritism to the rich and famous because we’ve been carefully taught by our secular culture the rich deserve our attention while the poor do not. So James is simply pointing out the problem and then offering the only solution, which by the world’s standards is crazy.

“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?”

“What good is it my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but do not have works? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says, ‘Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what good is that? So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (James 2:5-8;14-17)

Obviously there’s a lot to think and pray about in these verses so let’s break it down a few verses at a time.

First, verse five. “Listen my beloved brothers and sisters, has not God chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him?”

Listen carefully to what James is saying. God has “chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of his kingdom.” In other words, even though we’re warned not to show favoritism to the rich and famous, God does show favoritism to the poor and weak. I’ll repeat that. Even though we’re warned not to show favoritism to the rich and famous, God does show favoritism to the poor and weak. We can go to Jesus’ own teachings to prove the point. Several key verses come to mind: “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.” (Mark 10:31) “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” (Luke 6:20) “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)

Don’t interpret this to mean that just because you’re poor you have instant salvation. Poor people need to repent and commit to Christ as much as the rest of us. But the Bible teaches the poor have a special place in God’s heart because the poor, lacking the world’s brand of security, are the first to realize “God is all you need when God is all you got.” Not surprisingly Jesus’ first followers emerged from primarily the working poor and slave classes. Why? They came to Christ because they realized only God could fill them up with something money could never buy.

That’s why the poor have a special place in God’s heart. They know they need Jesus. But, according to the Bible, the poor also have a special role to play in God’s plan for the rest of us.

First of all, poor people who commit to Christ and the discipleship lifestyle can become our role models. We can learn from them how to be joyful even in the most dire circumstances.

North American Christians, who go on mission trips to help Christians in Latin America, Africa or the Caribbean, always return realizing they were the ones helped. We’re shocked by their poverty, but marvel at their faith. These poor people really believe in Jesus! Their churches rarely have a lukewarm spirituality. They put us to shame because they give, not off the top, but sacrificially from their poverty.

But the poor, besides having a special place in God’s heart, are also key players in God’s plan. How? Because the poor provide us with opportunities for servant hood.

For the sake of discussion, let’s not think of the poor exclusively as those who live below the poverty level. Let’s expand our definition to include anybody who can never pay you back in return. Remember what I said earlier? We impulsively show favoritism to the rich because we hope we’ll get something back in return. But when you give yourself, your time, your energy, your treasure to the poor there’s no way they could ever pay you back. Now I’m not talking charity, instead I’m talking about having the same heart for the poor as Jesus whenever he humbled and gave himself to those who could never pay

him back. You see, being a servant to the poor isn't just a good work, it's a means of grace as important as reading the scriptures, daily prayer and receiving the sacraments. You don't do something nice for the poor to feel good about yourself, but because when you befriend and serve the poor, together you experience God's grace.

Can you now see why James would write, “So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead?” (James 2:17) James isn't saying we can work our way to heaven, but James is saying the logical result of your faith is living and serving like Jesus, becoming a servant to those who can never pay you back, just like you can never pay Jesus back for dying for you on the cross. If that isn't living by faith and grace, I don't know what is.

I began this sermon with the scenario of our church going overboard over a celebrity in our midst. Here is a similar scenario, but with a twist, an incident that happened in a church in 2008. One Sunday morning about an hour before worship one of the ushers answered the phone. The advance man for one of the presidential candidates was calling to see if the church was willing to have his candidate attend worship. The caller knew the worship service was broadcast live to most of the State, so the candidate was hoping for free publicity, being acknowledged by the pastor, maybe invited to say a few words. All the usher could think to say was, “Worship is at 11 AM, and of course everybody is welcomed.”

Whether or not the usher was voting for the other guy is immaterial. He gave the right answer, “Everybody is welcome.”

Let that be a lesson to us. Everybody is equally welcomed, not only on Sunday morning, but every day of the week, whether the stranger you encounter is rich or poor. Yes, we welcome the rich, because they need Jesus too and, yes, we would welcome their sacrificial giving in time, talent and treasure. It's their giving that balances the books, funds our ministries and keeps our doors open. But we should also equally welcome the poor, because they model for us faithful discipleship, sacrificial giving, and opportunities for the rest of us to experience grace as we welcome, love and serve together in the name of Jesus our Lord.