

“Making Room at the Table”
September 8, 2024
Scripture: James 2:1-9, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

I find it surprising and reassuring whenever I find that all the frustrations and barriers we experience in the church as we struggle to make our actions match our rhetoric today have been an issue for the church from the very beginning. This letter from “James,” who was a figure identified as Jesus’ brother, but probably not the actual writer is a reminder that every generation must learn to express its devotion to Jesus in tangible ways, ways that make a real difference in the world.

James’ letter has been largely ignored by Protestants over the years. I suspect that’s because the original Reformist, Martin Luther, found it superficial; he famously called it “an epistle of straw.” One of the slogans of the Protestant Reformation was “grace alone, faith alone.” That’s what their bumper stickers would have read. So, they just ignored anything that contradicted that. But James says the quiet part out loud: “Without works, faith alone is dead.” The reality is if our commitment to Christ is to have any meaning in the world at all, then it should compel us to act in ways that reveal the values Christ teaches.

This is the central concern the writer of this letter has. He looks at the behavior of his community, their deference to rich people; their hollow platitudes to poor people, and wonders if they have any awareness of Jesus’ teachings at all. And he understands those teachings to be rooted in Jewish ethics and the Torah. These aren’t weird, out of left field beliefs. These are ancient codes of behavior summed up in the words, “love your neighbor as yourself.” That’s not some esoteric standard that no one can accomplish. It’s a basic principle, a fundamental value meant to be applied in every encounter.

Yet, we find it so hard to practice. We want to qualify it. We want to pick and choose our neighbors. In Luke’s gospel a seeker asks Jesus about this, and Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan. The neighbor in that story is the Samaritan who gave the man in crisis help. But here, in Mark’s gospel, we find a different encounter. Here, a woman comes to Jesus seeking help, she’s the one in crisis, but at first Jesus refuses. A lot of interpreters believe this is Jesus testing this woman, trying to gauge the depth of her faith, which honestly seems a little cruel; she’s looking for help for her child, after all. But I don’t think this is a test, at least not for her.

I think Jesus, like all of us, is a product of his environment. When he saw this woman, a Syrophoenician woman, a Gentile, we’re told, he did not see a neighbor. He saw an interloper; he saw someone looking to take advantage of a privilege he believed was reserved for his people. That wouldn’t have been very odd. There wasn’t a lot of trust between Jews and Gentiles in that part of the world in that time. So, I don’t think we can blame Jesus for being dismissive of her. There are also a lot of commentators who want to let him off the hook for calling her “a dog,” which really was a nasty insult. But what this moment does is create a space where Jesus’ understanding of his place in the world is expanded beyond what he thought was possible. And he’s open to that. When she confronts him, he’s impressed, delighted even. And it’s as if a light goes on in his mind and suddenly he can see her in a new way.

That's why we follow him. Jesus demonstrates the possibility of seeing beyond ourselves and including at the table of grace those around us whom we never imagined had a place. She belongs at the table not because of her ethnicity or social status or even her beliefs. She belongs there because she needs to be there. She needs what's offered at the table of grace.

Making space at the table, creating room for others to join us, no matter where they're from or what they've done or who they love is the purpose of those who, as James says, "believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." So, it's our purpose. We're called to make room at the table so more and more can receive what we have found.

What have we found? Through the teachings of Jesus we have found a path to extend compassion and acceptance and healing to those around us the world says aren't worthy. When we see folks who worship differently from us or whose skin color is a different shade from ours or whose gender identity is different from ours, we don't see someone who's a threat or someone to be shunned; we see a neighbor. We see someone to love. And according to James that means we reach out to them to offer them what they need, not what we think they need, but what they need to make their lives better.

I've pointed this out before, I'm sure, but it bears repeating, we do not live in the same kind of political context as the writers of the New Testament. For the writer of James and the writers of the gospels, there was no mechanism for changing their society. They had no political influence; they couldn't affect government policy in any way. But that's not our world. We have power in our world. We can do things on behalf of people who are marginalized that our ancestors in the faith could not imagine possible. In the first century world, and really clear up until the Enlightenment in the 18th century, political realities and social relationships were considered immutable. Early Christians violated the rules of their society and at times were persecuted for it. Eventually Christians were coopted by the ruling authorities and became part of the dominant system.

Even in our own country, which is founded on Enlightenment principles that reject the idea of a God-ordained ruling elite, the Church has often been an instrument of repression. We've often been the ones James talks about who say to people in need, "Go in peace; be warm and eat your fill," without giving them anything to "supply their bodily needs." But that's not the way it has to be. We have power to advocate for people in need. We can give them what's needed in the moment but we can also affect systemic changes that allow folks to access resources to help eliminate poverty. I think if the writer of James were among us today he would be astonished to see so many poor and homeless in a society where there are so many wealthy Christians.

But we can change that. Jesus shows us how. We change it by being open to the needs of folks around us whose lives we've learned to ignore. We change it by seeing them as neighbors and making room for them at the table of God's grace. We change it by learning to be delighted by those who refuse to be dismissed instead of being threatened by them. And we offer to them what we have in abundance: compassion, acceptance, healing.

Every generation of Christians has to figure out for itself how to change the world in which they live. We have at our disposal so many levers of influence and power that past generations never imagined. When we bring them to bear on behalf of those who are forced to the margins of our society, whether they're undocumented immigrants or people living in poverty or people targeted for discrimination because of their gender identity, we can affect real and lasting change in the world. We can bring our actions into line with our beliefs; we can bring our faith to life.

It all begins with acts of love toward those we meet who are in need. Christ has taught us through his actions in the world what it means to live God's love, to make room for more at the table of God's grace. Because there is always room for more. Open your hearts, sisters and brothers, to a world longing for love, for compassion, for healing, and let the love of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ live through you.

Amen