

“Of Faith and Works”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 9, 2018

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 146

Rev. John Wahl

James 2:1-10, 14-17

Mary lived in author Jim Wallis’ neighborhood and helped at their local ministry’s weekly food distribution. She was so poor that she too needed a bag of groceries each week. Yet, Mary was also a leader at the food ministry; she was often the one who said the prayer before its doors opened on Saturday mornings. She was one of those people, writes Wallis, “who pray like they know to whom they’re talking.”

Mary would generally begin by praying something like, “Thank you, Lord, for waking us up this morning! Thank you, Lord, that our walls were not our grave and that our bed was not our cooling board. Thank you, Lord!” She prayed in a way that showed she understood that God loved and looked after all people, and that God had showed her what was at stake in the treatment of people who are materially poor. Mary would conclude her prayer by saying, “Lord, we know that you’ll be comin’ through this line today; so, Lord, help us to treat you well.”¹

In the passage we read this morning, James introduces us to a group that seems to be the equivalent to our modern middle class. They are not rich – the rich are those whose attention they are trying to get. They are not the poor – the poor are those they are ignoring. These people are somewhere in between; they are the group that represents the broad middle of a bell curve, not on either extreme. In other words, they are people like a lot of us.

So, these in-between people are gathering for worship, and giving special attention to the wealthy members of their congregation; while ignoring the poor. James doesn’t tell us why they are showing favoritism, but we can guess. Maybe they’re hoping to be known for the company they keep and improve their social status. Maybe they are looking to schmooze and gain some business advantage. Or maybe, they recognize that to meet the needs of the larger community they need benefactors who can provide the financial support to get it done.

¹ As quoted by Doug Bratt from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

James is asking his own congregation about whether the ways the church treats people differs at all from the way society treats people. Do Christians view the poor the way Jesus viewed them? Are we able to see Jesus in them and treat them well? Or do our congregations just duplicate cultural expectations of prestige and power? When God, through James, calls us not to show partiality against the poor – but to welcome the poor as Jesus welcomed them – God invites us into the joy of imitating Christ.

Jesus calls us not to choose between rich and poor, not to choose between young and old, black and white, first world and third world, naked and clothed, hungry and fed. In the end, all of these are false dichotomies – superficial differences – for we are all children of God. James instead calls us place ourselves in between what is and what should be.

Over the past several weeks, we have been discussing worship: the *why* and *where* and *how* of worship; and today we conclude this series by look at its *what*; that like the rest of our lives, our worship life is based on the royal law – that we love our neighbors. This illustration from James is about how the members of a congregation might too easily ignore this royal law; in such a situation, he says, faith – without works – is dead.

Faith should make a difference in us. Even more importantly, these verses teach us, faith makes a difference in our relations with others: for just as God has chosen the needy, broken and poor as visible embodiments of Jesus’ good news among us, so faith re-orders our own desires away from securing our well-being by our own efforts, away from enhancing our own image by associating only with the bejeweled and finely dressed, and instead summons us to make friends with all; and trust in the provision of God who gives freely to all.²

Sometimes we feel stymied because we do not know how to effectively measure faith. Hebrews 11:1 teaches us that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” This holy mystery is therefore given flesh when attached with our works. In fact, in the verse immediately following this morning’s reading, James says, “show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.” (2:18) And so, salvation comes not from faith alone or works alone, but from actions in combination with faithfulness.

James 2 therefore invites us to reflect on what it means for us to love our neighbors. Do we show favoritism or impartiality? Do we look to see Christ

² A.K.M. Adam from *WorkingPreacher.com*

within, or do focus only on surface characteristics? In the *what* of our worship, are we showing love for our neighbors, for each of our sisters and brothers, no matter how similar or different to us they may be? James challenges us to consider how we will live out our faith together, in ways that reflect God's love for all.

And so, we believe, the *what* of our worship must include open and warm welcome. As God welcomes us, we are also called to welcome one another. This takes place by shaking hands and exchanging kind words, but it also manifests itself by not showing favoritism according to age, race, gender or wealth, by showing genuine concern for challenges of all types, by exhibiting patience with those who can be trying, and by accepting those with even visible faults.

This leads us to the second important principle about *what* worship is: that it includes the open confession and remission of sins. While we follow the Reformed teaching that no human intermediary is required to receive our confession, we also believe that it is important to provide the opportunity to publicly and corporately confess even our most private sins. By praying in unison, and then silently, we acknowledge both falling short of the mark Jesus set for us, as well as our sometimes unwitting participation in society's larger ills. Then, by receiving together the assurance of pardon, we recognize that God, through Christ, can and will forgive all – that God's love is without limit or end.

The third *what* of our worship is the reading and proclamation of the Word. In sharing and contemplating God's story, we seek to understand and affirm, individually and collectively, our own stories. This year, beginning next week, we will be planning our worship according to the *Narrative Lectionary*, a story-based schedule of readings that will walk us through the Old Testament during the fall, and the Gospel of Matthew in the spring. This will allow us to dive more deeply into some of the most powerful – and sometimes difficult – passages of the Bible.

Placing God's Word at a central place in our worship allow us to move to the final *what* of worship – which is our response. It is from the Word that we are called to affirm our faith, to enter into prayer for the church and the world, to experience God's grace in the sacraments of baptism and holy communion, to dedicate our time, talent and resources, and to prepare to be sent into the world to live out our faith through loving our neighbors. In this same category of response would be the music that we offer, the works of mercy and mission that we undertake, and the acts of companionship, compassion, healing and wholeness to which we commit. Each of these, we believe, are responses to the Word – God's story that becomes our story – which then inspires us to faith and action.

And it is these acts of faith – like visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, and working for justice – that bring life and energy to our worship. To imagine or expect that the service of worship will create the energy to sustain our faith is as misguided as seeking to honor only the wealthy well-dressed. God doesn't allow us to just walk past those who are poor, offering them only our words. Likewise, James reminds us, religion is not just a matter of what we believe or what rituals we practice. It's about how we treat each other.³

As we talked about a little bit last week, worshipping this way requires a lot of help; the liturgy that we follow each week truly is the work of the people: singing, praying, reading, welcoming, collecting, setting up, cleaning up – it takes a lot of helping hands. In a broader sense, worship only happens through the collective work of the congregation who will together build up one another's faith; so that we might be sent to make a difference in many different places. When we go from here, we take a part of one another with us – their wisdom and experience, their prayers and support, their strength and encouragement.

That is why I love the final act of our weekly worship – that we go out of our way to move towards our neighbor and link hands before receiving God's final blessing. Hands of all ages, whether friends or strangers, joined for one final moment to recall God's story of creating and blessing each us, calling us – as fellow children of God – to be a blessing to each other; to love our neighbors without favoritism or partiality. In releasing our hands, we are showing the faith necessary to go and do the works to which we are called, to make our worship come alive.

Sisters and brothers, the *what* of worship brings us back again to where we began; again to the *why* of worship. We gather in order to be sent; we give our devotion and praise to God because it is in loving our neighbors, and in showing our love for God through our love for them, that we follow in Jesus' footsteps, and live into God's story, and therefore fulfill our God-given purpose. AMEN.

³ Trace Haythorn, "Standing in the Tragic Gap"