

“Good News at Stake”
James 2:1-10
Andrew Foster Connors
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Religion is often built on principles. And James begins with one of our religion’s better ones – don’t make distinctions among yourselves. Don’t judge people by how they dress. Treat all people with the kind of respect that every human beings deserves regardless of status or station. It’s a beautiful vision for the world as God envisions it. The poor no longer get the short end of the stick. The rich no longer get treated as walking pocketbooks. Everyone is seen as a child of God.

It’s not hard to extrapolate from these first four verses of James a whole vision for celebrating all kinds of diversity; diversity that has been the flashpoint for oppression and violence in the past. Don’t make distinctions between each other based on the shade of one’s skin. Don’t make distinctions between each other based on nationality or creed. Don’t make distinctions based on ability, or zip code, gender, or even religion. Treat everybody as a child of God. Love them as you love yourself. Treat them as you want to be treated. That is Christ’s vision for the world. And it is the promise and the expectation of the assembly that gathers in Christ’s name.

It’s a great principle and then James turns around and violates it. Isn’t it the rich who oppress you? Aren’t they the ones who drag you into court? Aren’t they the ones who blaspheme the name of Jesus? In the space of a few verses, James goes from preaching the equality of all souls before God, to class warfare. The poor vs. the rich. God’s preferential option for the poor. James goes from welcoming the poor on the basis of no distinctions to welcoming the poor because God chooses them over the rich.

Though his logic is in question, I find myself in strange sympathy with his approach. Money does make the world go round. With a few token exceptions, the rich will escape the losses from this recession, even those whose greed helped push us over the edge. Those of us with wealth will keep getting our health care needs addressed while 46 million of our neighbors continue to get on with out it. Insurance companies and special interest groups who benefit from the current system will spend their millions to convince a fearful public that in order to keep health care for my family I have to prevent yours from having access to it. Money is power and those with that power will continue to step on those of us without it. It is the haves that continue to oppress the have nots.

At the same time I agree with James that God’s vision for the world is the absence of distinctions. The worth of each human being not judged on based on race, appearance, nationality, creed, ability, orientation, or wealth, but based on the sacred gift of life itself. Every life is precious in God’s eyes. Every human being is treasured – a work of God’s own imagination. Money shouldn’t make the difference. Money shouldn’t lead to distinctions.

I agree with James on both counts and I find myself struggling with what to do with it. How do I hold out hope for the world as God envisions it, without being naïve in the world as it exists right now? How do I live, not buying into the distinctions of our world while recognizing that I live in a world that does? How do I expose the distinctions that tear us apart without recreating them in the process?

James doesn't give a consistent answer. He bounces between making distinctions and condemning them, between upholding principles and breaking them. And we, the community, are left to sort it out. We're left to try to organize ourselves as a community that practices no distinctions, even as we live in a world that does. We're left to live in between these two worlds, trying to organize ourselves according to a vision that I'm not even sure we're capable of living out.

Maybe that is why James struggles so. Maybe he's worried that the assembly of God's people isn't going to be able to live out the vision. Maybe he's worried that they might turn into just another club, just another business, just another tool for empire. Maybe he's worried that they might not behave differently from the standard practices of the world they inhabit. Maybe James is worried that the community that he hoped would be different, that he believed would bring a different kind of community, a different kind of relationship, a different kind of hope was in danger of losing its vision.

Maybe that is why James sounds so conflicted. He's not a philosopher laying out a logical argument. He's a leader who's desperately trying to convince the community of Jesus Christ not to allow the distinctions of the world to creep into the community and create the same old divisions that we see everywhere else. He's trying every argument in the book to prevent economic divisions from sneaking inside the church. He's trying every argument to keep the stratifications of the world from creeping inside the church.

I don't think James is composing a rational thesis on principles. He's up to his ears in the practical struggles of keeping the vision of Jesus Christ alive and well in a world that is hostile to it. It is Christ's vision that must be kept alive within the church and James will try every argument to convince his people to believe it. If it happens nowhere else, the church must be the place where we struggle to organize ourselves according to God's vision. This must be the place where the distinctions of the world are kept at an arms length as we see each other with God's vision. This must be the place where rich and poor are categories that lose their meaning, and all people are treated as they are seen in God's eyes. Not rich, not poor, not black, white, yellow, red, or brown, but as God's children. This must be the place where God's vision has a fighting chance to live.

In the flesh and blood of community, that practical struggle is always argued on many different terms. When we were serving Idlewild Church in Memphis, homeless families were invited in off the streets for a meal, prayer, and fellowship with members of the church. When the program first started, questions were raised about whether it was a good idea for homeless people to sit in the same chairs, fellowship at the same tables, and eat off the same plates as those

used by members of the congregation. These were distinctions that were happening inside the church. And the principled arguments were the first ones that set out the vision. Jesus welcomed the poor and fed the crowds so should we. We believe all people are equal. The Bible tells us that when we feed, clothe, and shelter those in need we serve Christ. But when push came to shove the arguments didn't stop there. This will give us another feather in our missional cap, some said. This will set us apart from – maybe over and above other churches in the area. This will get us a spread in the local newspaper.

The struggle was so varied in its arguments that I couldn't tell you who was moved by which argument; I doubt a single justification was shared among the members of the church. Yet what came out of that struggle was one of the greatest signs of God's coming reign that I can imagine. A feast where distinctions are thrown out the window and everyone has enough.

It's that struggle – within the community – that's got James so fired up that he'll argue for it on many different terms. Because, for him, the good news is at stake. "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism, really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" Every time the community threatens to choose fear of strangers over hospitality the good news is at stake. Every time the community threatens to choose exclusion over embrace, the good news is at stake. Every time the community threatens to choose hoarding money and things over radical generosity, violence over nonviolence, fear over love – the good news is at stake.

I suppose for some it must be a great burden to imagine that the good news depends, in large part, on us – on the community gathered in Christ's name. Perhaps this is why sometimes our principled arguments lead to fracture within churches. We believe so desperately in our principles that there is little that we won't sacrifice for them. Perhaps this is why church can seem a little too serious and self-absorbed for a people already suffering in a culture of exaggerated self-importance.

But to me, imagining that the good news depends in large part, on us, isn't so much a curse as it is a blessing. It's a blessing because it means that what we do here every time we gather matters, and not just for us – it matters for the world. When we call on the name of Jesus and pattern our lives according to his teachings, we are participating in the salvation – the saving – of the world. When we declare that the table that is set in this community has enough bread and enough wine for all who wish to share in this feast, we are participating in the saving of the world. When we pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven we are participating in the saving of the world. When we invite a brother to share his grief, or a sister to share her struggles, or children to share their dreams, we are participating in the saving of the world.

Religion is often built on principles. And our religion has some good ones. Yet at the center of our faith there is more flesh and blood than there are principles. There is more struggle, joy, and hope than there are answers to well-defined questions. There is finally a community entrusted by God with good news, called together to pattern our lives on love incarnate, justice come to dwell; a community privileged to participate in the salvation of the world through our living and our dying.