

Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church
Brillion, WI

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Aug. 28 and Sept. 1, 2013

James 2:1-13

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? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? 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. Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

There are few names today that spark more discussion than Trayvon Martin. Everyone seems to have an opinion about what happened between him and George Zimmerman; how the laws in the state of Florida should/should not have been written; and how we should feel about the verdict that George Zimmerman received. Even as close as Milwaukee, hundreds turned out to protest Zimmerman's acquittal.

Rewind back to 2008 to the inauguration of our nation's first black president. So many felt that the promise had arrived. After the hope begun with the Emancipation Declaration and spoken in the famous *I Have a Dream* speech, many were wondering if the inauguration of the first black president meant the tide was finally turning. People thought, "Maybe, just maybe, we have arrived to a post-racial America." And now here we are in 2013 experiencing Trayvon Martin and the reality of a post-racial America seems farther away than ever.

Why is that? Is it our history? Is it our culture? Is it Jim Crow's fault or the recent rulings of the Supreme Court? What is it that makes skin pigment such a prominent issue for us? It's actually none of the above. James tells us that the way we treat others reflects what has captured our hearts. Or to say it another way, it comes down to what we believe about Jesus Christ.

Here's how James said it, "**My brothers, don't show partiality as you hold onto the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.**" (v. 1) There is a key, key connection to catch as you read this verse. James is connecting the way we treat other people to our faith in Jesus Christ. Why does he do that? He knows that they impact each other. What a person believes will dictate how they treat people. The flipside is also true. Showing partiality means that a person's faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ will be influenced. That shows us what a big problem partiality is. It is never as benign as, "If I treat certain people better than I treat other people it's not going to hurt me or anybody else." It is as serious as, "If I treat some people better than I treat other people, that fact will impact how I think about the Lord Jesus Christ." That's how big a deal partiality is.

Now I'm not aware of any recent local racial tension, but that doesn't make us any less vulnerable to problems with partiality. Partiality goes way beyond issues with race. In fact, James doesn't talk about race issues at all. He goes after socio-economic partiality. He imagines a scenario where a rich man comes in to a church. And then another guy comes in with shabby clothes. The rich guy gets ushered to the best seat in the house and the poor guys gets offered the standing room only section or the floor where he is welcomed to sit pretzel leg style.

There's an easy explanation for this. Most of the early Christians and, for that matter, most of the world's Christians today are poor. And so when a rich person walked into their midst they thought, "Bingo! This person could really help us. This person will give us status and, hopefully, a nice donation in the plate." That's why they ushered him/her to the front of the church and offered the luxury seat so the person would come back and maybe join the church. And what about the poor guy? Well, the church wasn't going to gain status, money, or significance from a poor person. So he can just go stand over there, right?

Do you see it? Those early Christians were interested in something very specific. They were interested in someone who could make them upwardly mobile. And it didn't matter how. They'd be happy with business advice or a fat cat donation or even if it was just the ego boost of having a person like that with them. Now they had validation. Now they were significant. Now they were powerful! Someone important was in their church! Do you see it now?

I have yet to see something like what James described happen at Trinity Brillion. It's pretty outrageous to envision our ushers giving special treatment to someone who is moneyed. But that doesn't mean that Trinity Brillion has somehow risen above problems with partiality. There's still partiality at work. It's just not for socio-economic reasons. I was sitting over at an auto shop the other day because for some unknown reason the window on our car wouldn't roll up anymore. It was kind of nice for a few minutes to play incognito pastor and let all the different conversations play out around me. I was sitting there reading when I heard a lady sitting next to me pipe up. She started like this: "I'm a Christian woman." I thought to myself, "This should be interesting," because a lot of times when people start like that they say

something really unChristian. On and on she went, clearly annoyed that her church somehow had the gall to send money to help people overseas. She said, "I just can't understand it. There are people who need help here too." She clearly had partiality at work in her heart. Not of the socio-economic variety. She wasn't upset about giving to the poor. She was upset that the people lived in the wrong zip code. She was partial to the people who lived near her.

Now let me get a bit more personal. I hope you'll open your hearts as I say this and hear it from someone who breathes the air here and loves this community and truly is a member of it. I was watching the Brillion Lions in the football playoffs last year and our quarterback, Bailey Krueger, took a terrible tumble. It was bad enough that he ended up having surgery and having to sit out the rest of the playoffs. Pretty big bummer for a guy in his senior year and for a community that was hoping to keep its hopes alive for a run at the title. And now I'm going to admit something to you that I'm ashamed of. I would not have felt the same way about Lancaster's quarterback - the team next on the playoff list. Fact is, if Lancaster's quarterback went down I'm pretty sure I would have thought, "Maybe we can still win now!"

And why did I feel that way? Because the quarterback from Lancaster can't help me. He doesn't bring joy to my community. He doesn't allow me to say, "I know this year's state champions. In fact, I taught a bunch of those guys in catechism class." He doesn't give me or anyone I know cause for small town pride. I was guilty of partiality. In fact, as James points out I was guilty of something much worse. I was guilty of breaking the most fundamental law of human relations that God has placed in this world, "**Love your neighbor as yourself.**" (v. 8) And here's where this connects to our faith. If we're not loving our neighbors that way, then it shows that something else is at work in our hearts beside the gospel. It shows that value judgments are alive and well. I judged that Bailey Krueger was more valuable than Lancaster's guy because of a zip code. The lady at the mechanic's shop judged people were more valuable based on their nationality. People in our nation's history have judged people more valuable based on their skin pigmentation.

The gospel is a totally different animal. In the gospel, "**Mercy triumphs over judgment.**" (v. 13) Do you see it? This whole issue of partiality goes straight to the heart of the gospel. Imagine if Jesus were a God who made value judgments based on nationality, zip code, skin color, or socio-economic position. Imagine a world like that. Imagine if John 3:16 said, "Everyone who believes and makes 100k/year will not perish but have eternal life." If that were true, then God's message would be very simple. "I am going to judge you based upon your income level." But that's not the principle that God wants to live by. And why not? Because the Lord is not in the salvation business to get profit or status or significance from us. He is in the salvation business to make mercy triumph over judgment.

And so that's the world he created. He sent a Savior that wasn't for any specific zip code. He sent a Jesus who wasn't for a certain tax bracket. He sent a Son that was truly colorblind. Do you know how one of the most memorized passages in the

Bible, Romans 3:23 starts? Maybe you're thinking, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." But do you know what falls right before that passage? **"There is no difference."** In other words, "There is no partiality, no distinction... **all... are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.**" (Romans 3:24) And why is all of this true? Because in God's world - and this is God's world! - God would work a plan to make mercy triumph over judgment. The plan? God wouldn't judge people. He wouldn't be partial towards "good" people or look at how tall they got or how brown a person's skin was or how rich a person wasn't. God wouldn't judge people at all. He would judge his Son. And for our sake, he found him guilty. That's what explains his suffering. That's what explains his cross. That's what explains his death. God would judge his Son guilty of our sin. And why? So that mercy would be given to everyone else. So that mercy would win the day! That's the world we live in right now. And that's the principle we live under today. Mercy. Not judgment.

Do you see what that means for you? God isn't going to make judgments based upon you or some aspect your life. He's not going to look at where you've lived; what your income level is; what color your skin is; what nationality you are; how impartial you've been; or how many violations you're guilty of under his law. That's not the world that God created in Jesus Christ and that's not the gospel principle we live under. Mercy will triumph over judgment. In Christ, God will look at you and give you mercy for everything. In Christ, he'll give you perfect leniency and ultimate pardon for partiality. And in Christ, he'll give you all the forgiveness and grace you'll need for the distinctions made between people. That is the world that God created through Jesus Christ. And that is the gospel principle that we live under.

And that also happens to be the gospel principle that we extend to all of the members of the human race. We don't make a value judgment about whether a person is worth helping or not. We just extend mercy. I heard a good story about that once. Remember this one? Robbers leave a guy beaten and half dead. One after another supposedly religious, godly people walk around him because they judge that they don't know him; or he's not where they're from; or he's not a member of their family. And then a guy living on the principle of mercy shows up. He doesn't ask whose responsibility the man is. He doesn't wonder if the person he's helping is good or bad. He doesn't ask where he's from. He bandages him all up. He puts him up in a hotel and he promises the innkeeper he'll pay any extra costs that pop up. And then the mystery man was on his way. He had nothing to gain. He had everything to share. And why? Because that man was living in a world where all his needs for mercy were met in Jesus Christ. He was living under the principle of mercy. Mercy that came to us from Jesus Christ. And mercy now given through us to others. Amen.