

September 6, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

The Impartiality of Love

James 2:1-9, 14-17 ...*do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?*

Mark 7:24-30 *But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*

...*endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness.*

(Covenant and Community Member commitment)

As Covenant and Community Members, one of the commitments we make is this: *to endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness.* Most agree that this is the most challenging of the disciplines. How in the world do you love in this way? How in the world do you forgive in every relationship, letting go of all those grudges, hurt feelings, anger? A few years ago, in a Covenant Members meeting, we were discussing this discipline. Vince Sawyer suggested that *in every relationship* must also include our relationship with the creation. We vow to live caringly, lovingly in the world of which we are part. With this discipline, we take to heart what the writer of the Letter of James says, echoing the words of Jesus: *You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* If we are working daily with this, we are on the right track. And we will always be learning more and more what it means to love and to forgive.

We need to become clear that loving and forgiving have to do with our own hearts and minds, our own inner life. That is how we do it. It is not about other people, whether they are lovable or deserving of our forgiveness. It is about me and the condition and disposition of my own heart and mind.

That inward problem is laid out in our reading from the Letter of James as a matter of impartiality. *My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism*

really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? James says that our favoritism and making of distinctions call into question our stated belief in Jesus. That is because *believing in Jesus* is not about firmly holding an idea or doctrine, but how we live. Last week we were in a very “religious” part of the country. There were giant billboards all over the place urging us to “believe in Jesus” so that we can “be saved”. We can say we believe in Jesus all day long, with great intensity and fervor, but if we are living in ways that show favoritism or prejudice, or demean certain persons or groups, our claim is empty and false. For James, as in the whole of scripture, to “believe in” God or Jesus means living in certain ways, the way of Jesus, the way of impartial love. It is not about going to heaven. It is about how we live in the here and now.

James gives an example, which may have been an incident reported to him. A wealthy, finely-dressed person comes into the community for worship. Everyone is impressed and happy. This person will bring us prestige, and maybe a hefty contribution. A poor, disheveled person enters, and that person is ushered to the side, or told to sit at our feet, that is, in the position of one judged to be in need of teaching. We live in a society, perhaps not so different from that of James's day, that is thoroughly saturated with the assumption that rich is good and poor is bad. We habitually laud the one who has gained wealth, and judge as lazy or immoral or inferior in some other way the one who is poor. Or we absurdly think that the wealthier the person is, the more intelligent or wise. Thus, we do not think the rich person needs teaching, but the poor one does. This is *making distinctions*. We do it all the time. This person is worthy; this other one is not. This person deserves my attention; this other person is not worth my time. This person has something to offer; this other one has nothing. This person makes me feel good; this person makes me feel uncomfortable. These are all conditioned responses in our hearts and minds, and that is where the change needs to, and can, take place.

The thing is, says James, God is on the side of that poor fellow you just shunted off to the side. God enriches in faith the poor and marginalized. They are receiving the kingdom promised to those who love God. The rich, powerful, and proud have lost the way. Are you forgetting, writes James, that they are the ones who oppress you

and try to get as much as they can from you? James is not pulling punches here. Yes, as the reading from Proverbs says, God is the maker of those who are poor and those who are rich. However, God is with them in different ways. The wealthy must learn generosity and selflessness, give up greed and the seeking of power over others. The poor are lifted up. Those who have little in the material sense tend to be closer to God and to the meaning of life. This is not, by the way, class warfare! This is the way God's universal love works to bring about balance, equity, and a community of mutual service and respect among all of God's children.

James is saying that our habits of favoritism keep us from seeing the big picture of who God is and what really matters. Our prejudices, the distinctions we make, are based on the illusions and false values we have bought into. Our vision is distorted so that we cannot recognize those who are closest to God and to life as it is supposed to be lived. When we are loving this person but not that one, when we are forgiving this person but not that one, when we go only where we are comfortable and hang out only with those who are like us, who share the same ideas and so forth, we have wandered very far from the kingdom. We have become lost.

The discipline of love and forgiveness probably is the loftiest and most challenging of them all. Yet, if we are not working with it on a daily basis, we will continue to suffer the consequences of our own lack of love and forgiveness. We are not free, but fearful. We are not joyful, but alienated. We are not living the life we were created to live because we have become prisoners of the favoritism and distinctions we make in relation to others.

How in the world can we hope to work with this discipline of love and forgiveness so that we make any progress? It sounds impossibly idealistic. Surely Jesus doesn't expect so much! Well, actually, I think Jesus does expect this much, and seems to believe we have it in us to live in this way. He said, after all, that we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. He made love and forgiveness number one signs of being his followers. Now, Jesus does not do it for us. Neither does he leave us alone, without the encouragement, wisdom, and power we need to love more completely. He leads the way. My favorite image of the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is found in the Letter to the Hebrews. He is the *pioneer and*

perfecter of our faith. He is the one who goes ahead of us, experiencing everything we do, and more. He blazes the trail for us to follow.

Which brings us to the story from Mark: Jesus has ventured into Gentile territory. There was deep hostility and prejudice between Jews and Gentiles. Jesus is beyond his comfort zone as a Jew. Suddenly, this Gentile woman hunts him down. She is Syro-phoenician, that is, representative of those peoples who inhabited the land before Israel's arrival. Her daughter is possessed by a demon, and she is desperate. Maybe this Jewish rabbi and reputed healer can help. She will try anything for the sake of her child. Note that this woman, a Gentile, has taken the initiative to step beyond her cultural prejudices and reach out to a Jew. For Jesus, being in the presence of a Gentile and a woman is against all his conditioning.

Jesus' response is cold, distant. In Matthew's version of the story, Jesus *does not answer her at all*. Stony silence. Then Jesus tells the woman that he cannot take the *children's food and throw it to dogs*. In Matthew, Jesus says that he has come only to the house of Israel, therefore he cannot throw their food to Gentile dogs. Jesus has just called this woman a dog! However, instead of being insulted and hurt, the woman persists. The well-being of her daughter is more important than getting caught in her own ego. Having and raising children cuts through a great deal of what is really unimportant. If we were a nation and world that lived for the sake of children, we would let go of the things that cause hostility and tension and violence, the things that do not ultimately matter.

The woman says, *Sir, I understand, but even the dogs get the bits of food that fall from the table*. She challenges Jesus. She pushes him. And he responds as one who now sees a deeper truth. *Good answer*, says Jesus. *Go home; your daughter is well*. In Matthew's version, Jesus says that the woman's faith has done this. She saw in Jesus someone who was, or could be, a channel of God's power to heal, and she had a fierce love for her daughter that would not give up until she got help.

I think this story is really about Jesus and the change he undergoes. Yes, Jesus had favoritism. He made distinctions. He was shaped by his culture. He saw life through the lens of his own people, his own faith tradition. Yet he was always open to God. This woman backed him against a wall, and the wall was within himself. This

brought him to greater awareness, and with awareness, the wall inside of him fell. Healing flowed. This does not diminish Jesus. It makes him even more powerful for us. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith because he, too, dealt with the things in himself that blocked the flow of God's love. He became fully a channel of God's love and forgiveness in every relationship. And if we stick with him, if we stay on this journey, we can, too.

As we become more loving and forgiving, we find our own liberation. We become free of the attachments, preferences, and prejudices that keep us alienated from others, that fill us with fear, that keep us in the pursuit of things that do not bring true happiness. We have been conditioned to favor wealth, achievement, success, prestige, power. So we become attached to those things. Therefore we favor those who we judge to be wealthy, accomplished, successful, important, and powerful. We distance ourselves from others. It is all rooted in our fear of not being a certain way, not having this or that, not being thought of by others as desirable or important, not being accepted or loved. Imagine what it would be like to be free of all those fears. All those attachments. All those feelings of insufficiency or unworthiness, or whatever it is that drives us to seek from others this or that. Imagine how the love and forgiveness would flow through us, beginning with a rivulet and growing into a great stream!

If we can look within ourselves with this kind of honesty, clarity, and compassionate understanding, the walls begin to come down. We come to see that we do not need the things from others we thought we needed. We do not have to look to others to give us something we already have and have had all along. Therefore we can drop our expectations, demands, preferences, and favoritism, and truly love others, not for what they can give us, but because they are, like us, children of God. We have begun to love with the love of God, in impartiality, in freedom.

This is all part of our inward journey work. It is not easy. It takes daily attention. It calls us to fuller self-understanding. Yet, it frees us from the burdensome illusion that we have to, or can, change others so that we can love them or forgive them. It frees us from expecting from others what they cannot give us, and therefore withholding our love when they do not deliver. It increasingly frees us to love and

forgive in every relationship because we are experiencing the death of the smaller self, the ego, and the awakening of our true Self, the persons God created us to be—made in the image and to be the channels of God's love.