



“Christ is for Losers”

Verne Windham

September 2, 2018

Scripture (CEB):

James 2:1-10, 14-17

2 My brothers and sisters, when you show favoritism you deny the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory. ² Imagine two people coming into your meeting. One has a gold ring and fine clothes, while the other is poor, dressed in filthy rags. ³ Then suppose that you were to take special notice of the one wearing fine clothes, saying, “Here’s an excellent place. Sit here.” But to the poor person you say, “Stand over there”; or, “Here, sit at my feet.” ⁴ Wouldn’t you have shown favoritism among yourselves and become evil-minded judges?

⁵ My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Hasn’t God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn’t God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Don’t the wealthy make life difficult for you? Aren’t they the ones who drag you into court? ⁷ Aren’t they the ones who insult the good name spoken over you at your baptism?

⁸ You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, *Love your neighbor as yourself*.^[a] ⁹ But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law you are exposed as a lawbreaker. ¹⁰ Anyone who tries to keep all of the Law but fails at one point is guilty of failing to keep all of it.

¹⁴ My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can’t save anyone, can it? ¹⁵ Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. ¹⁶ What if one of you said, “Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!”? What good is it if you don’t actually give them what their body needs? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn’t result in faithful activity.

Sermon:

If you suspect a theme today, you're right. It is a well-known theme around here: Westminster, that old line, stone, forbidding looking, downtown church next to all the homeless people. We're engaged, fully, in this aspect of our ministry. Why do we need to have sermons about it? We do it.

Reaching out to others has become an easy and the most thing we do. Or is it? It may also be one of the hardest, especially on a personal level.

In today's reading, James simply lumps them all together. Who are them? The poor. That sounds *oh so simple*. Yet there are all those practical realities. The other, those whom we don't know well, whom we don't know by name. It gets complicated, just ask our caretakers. Both, John Larson, and John Koontz before him, know this well. Extremely compassionate and caring men, they have met all our neighbors, the full range of them, the easy to love and the difficult to love. We have had to be wise, develop safeguards. You see increasing security devices. John doesn't open the church on Sunday mornings until there are enough people here to watch over things, and take care of people. We generally no longer directly help people financially, rather refer them to agencies.

This extends beyond our doors. Just look around the neighborhood. Those infamous rocks under the freeway, for instance. Or spikes on downtown walls so people won't sit on them. The collections of kids across Riverside from the bus station. The whole range of people in these situations, and the range of reasons they are. There are innumerable factors; laid off from work, medical bills driving to homelessness, abusive family members, victims of crime, PTSD, drug dependencies (including in my own family), untreated mental health issues, character issues, bad luck. I don't know. This is not my field. But we all live with the results. The range of the needy, or as James calls them, the poor.

What we most live with is our own reactions, and actions, or not, regarding all this. What are some reasons, or excuses. We are overwhelmed. Doing all we can. Our own problems don't leave space for others. Our plates are full. Full of our own problems? Full of our own

needs? Full of our own stuff. Studies have shown to be a natural inclination in people who rise above a problem, is to quickly forget where they came from. Who would not want to reject a difficult past when things get better?

How can we open ourselves to the people around us, and still maintain our own equilibrium? One of the great lessons of scripture, whether this one or many others, is the building of empathy. Christ showed it to us throughout his ministry, both by word and deed. But it is not so easy for us, no matter what the inspiration.

I'll get personal. It is easy for me to lose empathy. I'm increasingly aware, as I age and meet physical and mental challenges of all the times, I've had so little patience with others. Or, in other words, when I define others by myself. A silly example is driving. How often I've said "You have the right of way, go ahead. Don't you see you have a free right turn? C'mon, grandpa, the speed limit is 35. What're you slowing down for?" I was in Texas a couple of weeks ago. I'm sure all those Texans were saying that, and more, to me as I tried to make my way around a Dallas suburb. A simple example, but profound in the reminder that we define others actions by our own qualities, not theirs.

How do we change? One way is to practice. At the end of today's reading James, Jesus brother, exhorts us to not just believe it, but do it. That was also a strong tenet of my Lutheran background. Not only do we practice the actions, but we can practice the empathy. By engaging with the other, we put our attention on them, not ourselves. I certainly know about myself that I can be immobilized by self-doubt and self-criticism. A great way to get away from that; focus on the other. This may sound really simple, but maybe a great reason to be helping others is not the help they receive, but what we receive. I've seen so many of you in this church doing this, even when it seems futile, a drop in the bucket. What you are doing is practicing empathy, and by practicing it engraining into our own actions and lives.

Let's have the faith, and the courage, to do. And by doing, we gain faith.

The title of this sermon is Christ is for Losers. We can lose our fear, our self-centeredness, and our guilt.