

Faith Mennonite Church
Things that Make for Peace
July 10, 2008
Joetta Schlabach

Living by the 'mercy' quo: Honoring everyone as equal before God
James 2:1-14

The words we read this morning from the book of James were written within the first-century Mediterranean culture marked by a system of honor and shame and patron-client relationships. Honor refers to the way in which individuals are held in esteem as they embody the values and way of life of the group to which they belong (Hartin, 140). Christianity emerged within the Greco-Roman culture, which honored wealth and social status and gave a privileged place to men, whose honorable place was in the public sphere.

Jesus had lived a life in contrast to these dominant values and those who shaped the early Christian communities in their teaching and writing, Paul, Peter, James and John, also worked to shape a community around a counter-cultural set of values. The Greco-Roman culture saw Jesus' death as shameful – he had died as a political prisoner, on a cross. Christians, however, did not see the cross as the end. “His victory was demonstrated through his triumphal resurrection from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus brought Jesus to the right hand of [God]: honor and power were restored through his resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus guarantees that those who follow Jesus and emulate his values and way of life will also experience a reversal of fortunes at the end of time or the end of their lives” (Hartin, 143).

In the patron-client system, those of less degree sought protection and privilege through a patron of greater honor. Women found this in marriage; men sought this through relationships with more powerful people or through wealth and land acquisition.

The new community that Jesus formed and that grew rapidly after his death and resurrection set these systems of patronage, honor and shame on their head. This community of Jesus did not seek privilege or advantage in a human patron for God became their patron. And Yahweh God's character was marked by merciful love, extended to precisely those who did not enjoy a place of honor in society – the poor, the foreigner, the outcasts.

But how quickly and how easily we slip back into old patterns. This seems to be the situation that James is addressing as he reminds the Christian community that they must not fall back into the cultural patterns of prestige and domination of the surrounding culture, but show the same kind of impartial mercy that their patron God showed throughout Israel's history and in the example of Jesus.

I'm not sure whether it's reassuring or troubling to realize that the 21st century church struggles with this same problem. Maybe it's reassuring to know that people, some of whom had listened directly to Jesus' teaching, were still having trouble being transformed and hadn't built up true resistance to the dominant culture. But it's also troubling to think that, even after 2000 years, the church still isn't immune to the contagion of partiality and discrimination, not just around socioeconomics, but also race, gender, sexual identity, and more.

The example in our reading from James is sufficiently exaggerated that we can rather quickly dismiss it and say, “we wouldn't do that!” We wouldn't intentionally shame someone just because they are homeless and make them sit at our feet. Unfortunately our system of shaming is more complicated because it is systematized in often subtle ways: neighborhoods in

our country remain highly segregated with regard to income and race. Living in a “safe neighborhood” with “good schools” are often code words for seeking separation from the conditions that no doubt drew crowds to Jesus.

Habitat for Humanity in the Twin Cities has encountered a curious problem. They find that Christians from the suburbs are glad to volunteer to come into the city to build Habitat homes, but many of those same folks oppose the idea of having Habitat homes built in their suburban neighborhoods. A friend of mine who works in strategic planning for the Bush Foundation told me some time ago that the Twin Cities are becoming increasingly segregated, that the poor, many of whom are immigrants, are being concentrated in neighborhoods with the least desirable schools and few community resources. And as Carol reminded us last Sunday, these are often places of concentrated contamination.

Even as James is chiding his community, the solution is already at hand: the poor are present. Something about that community was attractive to the poor—the doors were open to them, even if the welcome, once they got inside, was not as robust as it could be. When the founding members of Faith Mennonite Church were seeking their first permanent location, they chose this neighborhood because of its proximity to the university and easy access to people on each side of the river. They probably had no idea that within a generation high-rise apartments on Franklin Avenue would be filled with immigrants. However, throughout this church’s history, dedicated members have envisioned that being a “peace church” isn’t simply a matter of conscientious objection to war, but seeking the “peace of the city.”

In the coming months, we hope to begin a renewed effort at being more outwardly focused, more visibly an active peace church in our city. We hope within the next month or so to fill our new Ministry Staff Position to help lead some of this effort. In two weeks Phil Stoltzfus and Carol Harder will attend an anti-racism training workshop in Sioux Falls, sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee and our Central Plains Mennonite Conference, and will hopefully return with understanding and tools to help us transform and expand our welcome in the complicated area of race.

The task can seem daunting but that is precisely why we begin at the Lord’s table. It reminds us of the mercy we have received. It reminds us of the power and hope in sacrificial love. It reminds us that we do not do the work of mercy alone, that many grains are ground and blended together to create bread that feeds others. And as we come to this table, all equal before God, all equally in need of God’s presence and power in our lives, we are nourished by the presence of Christ in our midst.

Please pray with me: Loving and merciful God, we thank you for calling us to be your people, your body in the world. We confess that we do not always show mercy in the same way we have received mercy, that we are unworthy to come to your table. Yet you draw us here and bid us eat and drink of this fruit of the new kingdom. We thank you for entering our world, our reality, our imperfections and quandaries through the humanity of Jesus, and for redeeming all through his death and resurrection. Grant us your forgiving grace and peace.