

Faith Mennonite Church
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Seek Peace & Pursue It
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Love your neighbor as yourself - Take 3
James 2:1-12

For three weeks running now our biblical text for the day—three distinct passages—have all circled around these same five words: “love your neighbor as yourself.” Two Sundays ago we heard the statement coming from Jesus, in response to a question about the greatest commandment. Jesus answered from Deuteronomy 6:5: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and might.” Then he continued from Leviticus 19:18: “love your neighbor as yourself.” Together, said Jesus, these are a singular commandment: love of God and love of neighbor are inextricable.

Last week, in the text from Romans, the apostle Paul wrote that all the commandments “are summed up in this word: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law” (13:9-10).

And today, the ripple continues in the letter of James: “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (2:8).

Each of these passages offers a slightly different nuance and emphasis. Here in the letter of James, the writer relates this command to the issue of social equality in the community and says in no uncertain terms: you can't profess to have faith—either faith *in* Jesus or the faith *of* Jesus—if you show partiality, if you treat people differently based on their wealth or poverty. James goes so far as to say that being partial in this way sets us up as judges with evil thoughts! It's tantamount to violating any of the Ten Commandments—such as prohibitions against murder or committing adultery. This is serious stuff!

We do not know the identity of the writer of James. Some suspect that he was the brother of Jesus, James of Jerusalem, or at least someone deeply familiar with Jesus' teachings, because the book contains themes and images that repeatedly recall the ethical teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. James wrote: “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?”

In this we hear an echo of Matthew 5 where Jesus taught:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. (5:3, 5)

For Jesus, it was among the poor where he found faith, and in the church, writes James, we must be a place where people of all social classes are equally valued, treated with equal respect, given equal honor and opportunity. Love your neighbor as yourself.

How do we translate and apply this to our setting and circumstances today? It's always tempting to find egregious examples of how other churches are missing the mark. Author Diana Butler Bass recounts the case she found as she was doing research about vibrant mainline congregations. One church in a city center had a fabulous website that was full of language of welcome and hospitality. They had paid a consultant big money to create an image. But when she visited, she found a gated community; the church had spent an equal amount of money

erecting a stately fence that kept area homeless people off the property. Now that's the church that James was addressing, right?

But no scripture ever lets us off the hook entirely. Today's text invites us to look within: do we show partiality? I invite us to think about two levels where we need continually to examine our actions with regard to partiality. One is the interpersonal—here in our gathered community and in our closest relationships in our neighborhoods and workplaces. The other is the systemic—our interactions in the larger society and economy.

First, the interpersonal. Most of us will fess up to judging others by appearance to some degree or, at least to the fact that we find it difficult to enter into conversation with someone new if we're not sure we have anything in common. No doubt some of you present today have experienced awkward moments during our fellowship time when you've stood alone and no one approached you to talk. Or perhaps you have observed someone standing alone and didn't feel confident to open a conversation. Granted, many of us are introverts, but our hesitancy might also spring from the cultural messages that surround us each day: messages about professional success and financial independence, about intelligence, and appearance. But not one of those are included in Jesus' list of the blessed characteristics and the blessed places that constitute the reign, or kingdom, of God.

Being aware of the subtle danger of partiality begins with an examination of our conversation patterns and how we engage others. What are the first questions we ask when we meet someone new? It's often tempting to ask about a person's profession or employment. Great question if the other person is employed or retired by choice. But if one is unemployed or underemployed or undocumented, this can be uncomfortable territory.

What are some different ways to begin a conversation that don't assume that one's professional status is the most important thing about them? Here in church it seems that a logical question to a newcomer might be simply a query of how they happened to come? How did they hear about our church? What were they hoping for and did their experience match their expectations? What draws them to church and have they been part of other churches? What are their concerns and what are their passions, their hopes for being part of a faith community? And to the familiar others we can ask from time to time: how is it going in your walk with Jesus?

I recently heard someone comparing two types of people: one type enters a room looking forward to the opportunity to learn something new about or from someone they encounter. The other type enters the room hoping to enlighten others or simply find common cause. Here in the church, and in our neighborhoods and places of work, let us nurture the habit of the former, open to learning from everyone, recognizing that no one is greater than another in the kingdom of God, and finding our commonality in our belovedness in God rather than a certain socio-economic status.

This brings us to the second area: the way we function as members of society and within the economy. If avoiding partiality on the interpersonal level can be tricky, avoiding partiality within our culture and economy is downright befuddling. Here it is sometimes easier to see the evil, but understanding how we might be complicit in it or how we might respond gets much more complicated.

For instance, most of us are proud to live in the Twin Cities, enjoying the high quality of life, the great bicycle trails, beautiful lakes, the excellent system of higher education. Yet we are one of the most racially segregated metro areas in the country and we have an embarrassing achievement gap in our public school system. Furthermore, the recent recession was felt very differently by different racial groups. "In 2009, white Minnesotans had a 7.1 percent

unemployment rate, lower than the rates for white residents in 30 other states. But for African-Americans and Latinos, the numbers were grim: 22.5 percent unemployment for African-Americans and 15.5 percent for Latinos.”¹

The best way to turn these employment and educational achievement gaps around, according to Myron Orfield, who directs the Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity, is through maintaining racially diverse communities. In a recent interview on Minnesota Public Radio, Orfield said the best current example of such diversity in the metro area are the twin suburbs, Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center. “These racially diverse suburbs are wonderful places. They do the best job at reducing the achievement gap. In these places, race relations are the best,” Orfield said. “They’re bipartisan places, where people of different parties have to cope. They’re a model for what a multiracial metropolitan America should be like.”²

But, they’re also in danger because, historically, when minority populations begin to grow in a given area, white people start to move out, draining important resources away from the community. And here is where the church, in general, hasn’t been bold in recognizing this reality nor in talking about the fact that one way we live out our faith is by *where* we live. Granted, this isn’t as easy as talking about modifying our conversation patterns and being more inclusive in our interpersonal interactions. Here we’re talking about decisions we make about what neighborhoods to live in, how and where to invest our money (if we have resources to invest), what schools to enroll our children in. Do we purchase property primarily thinking of its long-term value for our personal portfolio or do we invest for the long-term value of a diverse neighborhood, for the well-being of children born into poverty? Love your neighbor as yourself.

The more complex these issues become, the more we need one another to help us consider these decisions. And the more we need a sacred system of law that helps guide us as a community, and provides an identity in the way that Torah, the law of liberty, guided Israel and the early church. The life of discipleship that the Gospels and New Testament calls us to is countercultural. New Testament scholar Patrick Hartin, in describing the early church, wrote: “While the wider society proclaimed wealth to be valuable and deserving of honor, and poverty the path to shamelessness and degradation, Jesus, James, and Paul all reversed this condition. In the community of the followers of Jesus honor came for faith in God (see Jas 1:9) rather than wealth and status in society. Christians receive their honor from being part of God’s people.”³

Honored brothers and sisters, may we deepen our fellowship and trust with one another as we learn from one another and seek together how to be the countercultural witness and peacemakers that Jesus has called us to be—as we love our neighbor as ourself.

¹ <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/05/24/race-and-unemployment-in-minnesota/>

² <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2012/07/20/social-issue/diverse-demographics/>

³ Patrick J. Hartin, *Sacra Pagina - James*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press 2003, 144.