

16 Pentecost (Proper 18). Proverbs 22; James 2; Mark 7:24-37. September 9, 2018.

There are times when the Bible works like a scalpel, cutting down precisely to the place where we are broken, or unfaithful, or need that little shot of love and healing that will make it possible for us to believe and love again. And then there are days like today, when the Bible works more like a sledgehammer, pounding a point home with blunt and irresistible force. It is actually a coincidence that we've ended up with these three complimentary readings that shout down our ears that the gospel shows no partiality between rich and poor or between native and foreigner. The gospel of Mark's story of Jesus in foreign territory, in Gentile land, encountering and healing almost against his will people unlike him—is just what comes next in Mark's story. And this is our second of five weeks in the letter of James and, much to the consternation of our Lutheran cousins, he will be like this all month. And we're reading Proverbs because the people who put together our calendar of readings ran out of good stories about King Solomon and so started assigning the books of the Bible traditionally attributed to him. Deacon Sue and I have a bet on whether you will believe the truth that this is just what the Bible is like, without any manipulation by a sinister cabal of leftist priests.

It would just be a lie to pretend that the point of our first two readings is some hidden spiritual secret. No, they mean what they say. Proverbs insists that we all, rich and poor, come from God and asserts that God has a special care for the poor and vulnerable. To encourage us to treat the poor with care and justice, it reminds us of that sure-to-make-us-squirm idea: the wrath of God. There is nothing to dig down to the bottom of here. Rich and poor are equally God's people, and God's anger is kindled by cruelty or carelessness towards the poor.

And James echoes this just as clearly. He is writing to members of the church and chiding them for rolling out the red carpet for potential big donors, but sticking visitors who are poor in the corner. He puts it more strongly than I think any Episcopal priest could get away with, but his point is that from God's perspective these Christians have it precisely backwards. Things get a little confusing with the murder and adultery part, where I think he's saying that partiality for the rich is a sin, just as adultery and murder are. And since talk of works sounds more like law than grace, he reminds us that we follow the new law of liberty and mercy. It is hard to resist that eminently meme-able sentence, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what good is that?"

There's no great mystery here. It's almost a little boring to preach it. We do not have to be Christians, but if we are Christians, we will help poor people and welcome them with as much warmth as possible into our fellowship. Being Christian inescapably involves being made alive by a faith that spills out into love for neighbors in need.

Because we are so loved by God, we love others in tangible, practical ways. Because God's mercy has set us free, we try in mercy to help others to freedom from whatever chains them: poverty, hunger, illness, oppression—basically the sins of others, their sins, and the results of bad luck.

Mark's story is a little more complicated. Most likely, this story is part of an argument between early Christians on what role non-Jews play in the church. The author wants them to have full inclusion and perversely, Jesus is initially the mouthpiece of the author's opponents. It may be that this "to the Jew first, and then to the Gentile" stuff, in various forms, was a slogan of the all-Jewish party—perhaps reaching all the way back to the very first moments of the Jesus movement. We are disturbed by the apparent racism of classifying a whole group of people "dogs," and we're puzzled by the Christological implications of Jesus' understanding of his vocation growing and changing. We aren't used to this unwarranted harshness and we certainly aren't used to seeing him lose an argument.

These are interesting and important questions, but they aren't the good news of this passage. The good news here is a divine love that cannot be contained within ethnic or even religious boundaries. It is God's love surprising even the ministers of it with its expansiveness and power. It bursts out without partiality onto even the least likely people, healing the possessed, and opening ears and mouths to hear and proclaim the good news that God has come and is coming to us in the person of Jesus.

The *really* good news is that God's love is poured out even on us, healing us of the obsessions and possessions to which we have given our lives. It is opening our ears and mouths so that even we may hear and proclaim the gospel. And—of course—it calls us to proclaim that good news without regard for the petty boxes by which we classify people. To the poor and to the rich; to those like us and those unlike us. To those who look down on us and, God forgive us, to those down on whom we look.

The big blunt hammer the Bible is using today is whacking us over the head to say that God's people are not just the folks who look like us. God's love and care know no boundaries, are neither should ours. We, too, are recipients of this love and to receive it properly means to share it. Amen.