

Before we do anything else this morning, I want to finish addressing the idea of conflict between Pauline and Jacobean theologies, that is that Paul and his followers (mostly Protestants) preached a good news of salvation by faith alone and that James and his followers (mostly Catholics) never escaped the dangerous trap of righteousness through the Jewish Law. Nothing, in my mind, could be farther from the truth. A careful, contextual reading of both the book of James and the letters of Paul shows a great deal of agreement between these two giants of early Christianity. It is entirely possible for a reasoned and passionate believer to declare “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any one should boast,” while that same believer at the same time asserts, “Faith without works is dead.”

Many Christians, and perhaps some of us here this morning, have been made uncomfortable by James’ repeated reference to the law in our passage this morning. It makes it sound as if he is indeed calling for a strict adherence to the Mosaic Law that we think has been set aside by Jesus. But what law is James really promoting? First, in verse 8, he calls on his readers to follow “the royal Law” or, as the Jerusalem Bible translates it, “the supreme law of scripture,” which he then defines: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” James here is echoing his brother Jesus who, when asked, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Paul, too, wrote to the Galatians, “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

After reminding his readers just how easy it is to be condemned under the law of Moses, a tactic that sounds very like Paul indeed, James tells them, “Anyway, you should speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of freedom.” The “Good News Bible” translates that as “the law that sets people free.” The eighth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans begins like this: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” And, later in his letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Neither Paul nor James are talking about the Mosaic Law but about the New Covenant in Christ’s blood that we celebrate every month at this table, the promise that belief in Christ Jesus will bring abundant and eternal life. Both James and Paul are members of the New Covenant.

Finally, for our look at this false dichotomy between James and Paul, there is the “faith without works is dead” problem. It comes as a surprise to some folks that Paul wrote very similar words. In Galatians 5:6, we find this: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith working through love.” I could go on with other references to Paul’s call to an active faith, including some from Ephesians, which we just studied together, and Romans, which we looked at last summer, but I hope you get the idea. For some of you, this whole train of thought may seem specious at best, interesting only to theologians. Unfortunately, the false contrast between Paul and James has been the source of discord in the Church over the centuries, so I wanted to be sure to address it.

Now, to more practical matters. James, Paul and Jesus before them all focused on the importance of an active love for God and neighbor. In this morning's passage, James specifically refers to our obligations to the poor; to treat them as well as we would treat the wealthy and to respond to their needs with real action and not just platitudes. In 21<sup>st</sup> century Seattle, the poor may seem very far away. It's certainly possible for most of us to go through life with very little interaction with poor people. We may even be able to convince ourselves that there are no poor in our neighborhoods. One of Connie's former bosses was convinced that there were no poor people on the Eastside, despite the presence of soup kitchens and homeless shelters. But for the people of God, service to the poor must always be a priority because the poor are a priority for God.

Our Scriptures bear witness that God especially loves and cares for the poor. Psalm 12 says, "'Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now arise,' says the Lord; 'I will place him in the safety for which he longs'." The prophet Isaiah reflects, "For God has been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress... the poor among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel." Both the Psalms and Isaiah also promise God's continued care for the poor: "God does not ignore the cry of the afflicted... the needy will not be forgotten, nor the hope of the afflicted ever perish." "The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them."

Dr. Bruce C. Birch, professor of Old Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., made an important point about God's relationship with the poor in his 1975 article for The Christian Century. "God's love for the poor does not imply an acceptance of their condition. He loves them in order to deliver them from poverty." Birch cites Proverbs 15:15 as proof that God regards poverty as an evil, and writes, "God's response is to deliver his people from it. God promises not merely to love the poor and the hungry but to be active in their behalf: "I will satisfy her poor with bread" (Ps. 132:15)."

Birch has another important reminder for us in that article: the law codes of the Old Testament are full of God's directives on how to care for the poor and uphold their rights. "Concern for the poor," says Birch, "is taken out of the realm of voluntary charity." The nation that the Children of Israel were to establish in the land of Canaan was supposed to follow this command in Deuteronomy 15: "There will be no poor among you.. if only you will obey the voice of the Lord your God. . . . If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren, in any of your towns within your land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need. . . . You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging. . . . For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore, I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor . . ." By the terms of the covenant at Sinai, the poor were to be lent money but not charged interest, nor were their clothes taken as security to be kept overnight. Every seventh year was to be a sabbatical year, with debts forgiven and land sold to pay debts restored to the family who had sold it. Those who had sold themselves into slavery to pay debts were to be released every seven years and given the beginnings of a flock to earn their living with. Harvests were not to be too carefully collected so that food would remain in the fields and vineyards for the poor.

These regulations to prevent poverty were, of course, ignored in large part and, centuries after Moses, God's prophets called the people of Israel to account. Amos said, "Therefore, because you trample upon the poor and take from him exactions of wheat, you have built houses of hewn stone but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine." Still, the prophets tried to remind God's people of the right, loving way to respond to the poor. The prophet Ezekiel gave God's picture of the righteous woman or man: "[he] does not oppress any one, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not lend at interest or take any increase." Moved by the same seemingly eternal conditions, James writes, "If a fellow man or woman has no clothes to wear and nothing to eat, and one of you say, "Good luck to you! I hope you'll keep warm and find enough to eat", and yet give them nothing to meet their physical needs, what on earth is the good of that?" Care for the poor was not something James just wrote about. Paul reports in Galatians that when his apostolic mission to the Gentiles was ratified by James, John and Peter, "All they asked was that we should remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do."

Perhaps nothing brings home the deep care that God has for the poor more than the fact that Almighty God, Creator of the Universe, Yahweh Sabaoth, in fact became one of the poor; a carpenter born to a young unmarried peasant girl in a stable in an occupied and impoverished country. When James talks about the ragged fellow who received such short shrift in the assembly, could his mind have been very far from his own brother and Lord? "For he had no form nor comeliness; no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (But) surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows... he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." When we refuse to love our neighbors as ourselves, fail to see the divine image in them as well as in us, when we turn away from "the least of these," are we not turning away from Jesus himself?

I had a tough time writing this sermon this week. You see, I think it's important for me as your pastor, the vicar of Christ to this part of the Body of Christ, to always share the Good News. The problem is, as I read the newspaper and magazines and websites, as I hear the news on the radio and television, I don't find much good news when it comes to the world's dealings with the poor. I am so very, very proud to be a member of this congregation, where we are trying to use what resources we have as a church to help those in need, giving half of our land for affordable housing, working with other ministries to the homeless. Our youth willingly have gone hungry for a 30-hour period once a year every year for the past several years to be in solidarity with and raise money for the poor. But when I look at the behavior of our elected leaders, past and present, in this, the wealthiest country on Earth, when I consider their failure to ease the plight of the poor, I am heartbroken and angry.

Let's be clear about something right off the bat. There are poor people in America and most poverty is not caused by ignorance, sloth or misbehavior. In her widely read book, Nickled and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America, Barbara Ehrenreich gives the account of her own personal experience with being one of the working poor. Challenged by her editor, Ehrenreich

left her home and took a series of low paying or minimum wage jobs to see just what obstacles faced the approximately 30% of American workers who make less than \$10/hour. For six months, she worked full-time in jobs available to “unskilled” workers with minimal education: late night waitress, house cleaner, hotel maid, nursing home “dietary aide”, WalMart clerk. She lived in budget motels and run-down trailer parks, ate only what she could afford which was often fast food. She discovered that keeping her expenses to a minimum, she needed two of those low paying jobs just to survive and so found herself physically and emotionally drained. She had little or no paid time off for illness and, of course, no health insurance.

The lifestyle into which the working poor are forced has deep and lasting ramifications, often perpetuating itself. In his book, The Working Poor; Invisible in America, Pulitzer Prize winner David Shipler traces the cycle: “A run-down apartment can exacerbate a child’s asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother’s punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing.” We’re already aware, of course, of the desperate need for affordable housing, but it’s worth pointing out that the National Coalition for the Homeless reports, “in the median state a minimum wage worker would have to work 89 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing.”

Our elected leaders, charged with preserving the common good of our nation and most of whom claim “the glorious name by which we are known,” have found it impossible for political reasons to address this problem. The federal minimum wage has remained at \$5.15 for 10 years, despite inflation that means the earning power of that wage is now at its lowest point since minimum wage was federally mandated in 1955. While keeping the minimum wage frozen since 1997, incidentally, congressmen have voted themselves *raises* totaling \$31,000 a year. In other words, their salary has increased by three times the total income of a minimum-wage worker.

Let me be very clear about what I am saying. This is not a partisan problem; I am not indulging in a little surreptitious party politics this morning. Both sides of the aisle have failed in their responsibilities to their poor constituents. The most visible example of this is the tragedy surrounding the devastation of the Gulf Coast hurricanes last year. As all of us saw on television, the most affected were and are the poor, who could not escape the wrath of the storm and have not been able to gather the resources to return to or to rebuild their homes. The Bush Administration has been widely and rightly criticized for lack of preparation, for cutting the budget of the Army Corps of Engineers to repair and replace levees in the face of report after report that showed how critically needed the work was. But less talked about is the fact that, just months prior to the storm, Louisiana’s own Democratic Sen. Mary Landrieu cause money earmarked for levee repair to protect poor neighborhoods to be diverted to projects that benefited the wealthier owners of commercial shipping ventures. And, in fact, the Army Corps of Engineers budget for the New Orleans hurricane protection system has been consistently under funded since the mid-1960s, according to Forbes magazine, by Republican and Democratic administrations alike.

We've also been treated to coverage in the past year of the clear way in which our legislators give preferential treatment to the rich. The latest *cause celebre* has been the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal, which is perhaps all the more odious because Abramoff's "favors" to legislators were paid for by money he raised from Indian tribes, some of the most impoverished people in America, who Abramoff held in such contempt that he was quoted as referring to them as "monkeys" and "troglodytes." Most of the legislators involved in this story of pandering to the moneyed have been Republicans but it's been Democrats in previous scandals and the pendulum will continue to swing to whichever party has the majority. I still remember with horror that one of my boyhood heroes, John Glenn, was implicated in a similar money-for-influence scandal in the 1980s when he was Senator from Ohio. The sole Republican Senator named in that scandal, by the way, was John McCain, who apparently learned enough from getting his hand caught in the cookie jar that he cosponsored serious legislation on campaign finance reform. Perhaps there's hope for American politicians after all.

The practice of "following the money," of serving the rich at the expense of the poor, is hardly confined to politicians. For the Jesuit commentator, Fr. John Bucki, James' teachings on impartiality raise the following questions: "How just is the difference in salary between the top executives and the other workers in large corporations? How fair are the inequalities between the resources of different school districts in our country? How fair is it to the children? How fair is the power of different nations at the various international gatherings? Do all nations have fair input? Are decisions on trade dominated and controlled by the powerful nations or the wealthy corporations to preserve their advantage? Do the poor nations have a chance?"

In April, 1963, while he was dying of cancer, Pope John XXIII issued his last encyclical, *Pacem in Terris: On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty*. In it, he wrote, "Beginning our discussion of the rights of the human person, we see that everyone has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services. . . . Therefore a human being also has the right to security in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood, old age, unemployment, or in any other case in which one is deprived of the means of subsistence through no fault of one's own."

Most of us are not in a position to issue such statements and have them receive worldwide attention. But all of us are in a position to conduct our own lives in the spirit of James and Jesus and our loving Creator. We have come together here at Good Shepherd to try to do significant things for the "least of these" in our community and, in working with other ministries, for people around the world. But we must also carry our mandate to serve the poor and to act impartially out into our workplaces, our schools, our neighborhoods. Each of us will have opportunities, from time to time, to help other people, to influence corporate policies for justice, to make our voices heard with legislators. We must let our political and corporate leaders know that we hold them to the standards of God. We must act whenever we have the chance for our faith is not something that can exist in abstract. We do not follow one who was content to say, "Go in peace; be warm and filled." He fed the hungry and healed the sick and died and rose again to restore us to loving relationship with God and with each other. Now it is our turn to carry the Good News to the poor and the sick and the hurting that the time of God's love is now and that

we stand ready with meals and bandages and a roof, ready to share with others the blessings we have from God. Thanks be to God!