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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18)
September 5, 2021

Lectionary Year B: James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17

Having had, for most of my life, at least *something* to do with institutions relying upon voluntary donations, there has usually been one person whose role in the organization is to solicit money from gracious benefactors. That person is known as the *development director*. Simply put, the development director is needed because the money just doesn't fall from the sky. A good development director should have the people skills and the tact necessary to get any quantity of money they can out of a potential benefactor without being pushy, gushy, or overbearing.

Yet perhaps a few of us have had the experience of being at some sort of fund raiser where the organization's development director *walked right through us* on his way to someone with more money to give or with larger contributions on record. While I agree that it is important to be good to your big givers, I would gladly advise any development director *to not make a scene of it!*

Such advice is – dare I say – *biblical*. We read in this morning's text from James: “[I]f a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please,’ while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there,’ or ‘Sit at my feet,’

have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” (2:2-4).

Apparently, it was common in James’s time to lavish attention on wealthy people, often at the expense of the poor, which, in this epistle, is an injustice for which there is no excuse. James proceeds further, saying, “Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. 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? But you have *dishonored* the poor” (2:5-6a, emphasis mine).

So, judging by this text, who deserves more attention? Are we all inclined to be like the development director who walks through a bunch of people of modest means on his way to the ones with the big bucks? We might want to evaluate what we’re up to, sometimes, because while there are people upon whom we lavish attention because they’re of a “better” class, we cannot do this at the expense of those who have real needs.

And that’s what gets me thinking about where we send our money... Do the institutions with the three bazillion dollar endowments really *need* the money? I’ll admit it – I too have given to institutions with three bazillion dollar endowments, and while that isn’t *bad*, I would hope that we could all be *equally* generous to those not so richly blessed. It’s not that we ought to *stop* giving to well-heeled institutions and simply *redirect* our giving to the poor or something like that; rather, I’m proposing that we show the same enthusiasm for giving to the needy as we do for giving to the blessed.

The one difference is in giving to the needy is that we probably won't get the same recognition; our names won't appear in the annual report and we won't be honored at some banquet, but that isn't what giving is about. I hope we all know that!

We can find worthy causes all around us, and, as we're reminded every time we pick up the mail, there's a vast array of organizations ready for our contributions. One could bankrupt oneself quite quickly by giving to all of them. But what I find this morning's text doing is *focusing us on one need*, and this is important because no matter how discerning we are, we can still get confused and overwhelmed by all the needs we perceive. And right here in our text, it's *very* clear; James tells us, "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 is the good of that?" (2:15-16).

If we are people of faith as we claim to be, are we offering ourselves as freely to the *obvious* needs as we are to the *perceived* needs? James is pointing at those who *think* they're people of faith and yet, when confronted with an *obvious* need, they offer little more than a pious gesture – "Go in peace, God bless, don't let the bedbugs bite," et cetera. Christianity calls people not to pious gestures but to real action. Look at the example of Jesus – how he came to be among the lowest of the lowly and ate among outcasts and sinners. You can imagine how much it must've irked James to see a community of Christians *reversing* Christ's example! Such a reversal meant that the rich deserved the attention and the poor could be forgotten.

When people talk about how much things have changed, I see all the more how much they've remained the same...

One need that'll *never* go away is the need for money. But while our text makes a contrast between wealth and poverty, it really doesn't say much about *money* itself. Rather, it talks about "supply[ing] their bodily needs." So looking at this text alone, we *aren't* advised to simply throw a bunch of money at poor people, although such contributions probably wouldn't hurt. Yet the toughest thing for us to do is to be philanthropic with our time and talent *as well as* with our money. James writes something here in this text that *really* upsets the sensibilities of heirs to the Protestant Reformation, going all the way back to one of the Reformation's biggest heroes, Martin Luther. Those with a working knowledge of church history would know which verse I'm talking about – James, chapter 2, verse 17: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

I'm going to have to agree with James here – not because it's provocative or against Reformation principles – but rather because it points to an unwillingness we naturally have to *live out* our faith. If the tree bears no fruit, then what good is it? We know that throwing a bunch of money at something isn't necessarily going to make it better, but do we know, too, that simply sitting around and waiting for it to *get* better isn't going to accomplish anything, either? Therefore, when you encounter an *obvious* problem, *please* don't be afraid to do something about it. Remember to forego the *pious gesture* for *real action*.

But we'll have to get around ourselves, first...and by this I mean that *we'll be in a big fight against sin*. Sin is what causes all the partiality, the favoritism, the desire for recognition,

and the dishonoring of the poor around which this morning's text revolves. In the big picture, the development director walks through a bunch of people on his way to the high rollers not because he's *tactless*, but because he's *sinful*. Things really aren't that much different in James, chapter 2. People would give up their seats for a high roller and yet tell a pauper to *go stand over there* or something. But Christianity *is* the world's greatest equalizer, because no matter what "class" we're in, we're all equal before the Lord. We're all sinners, and we're all in need of his grace. So there's no way that, in good conscience, you (as a Christian) could dismiss a person simply because they weren't stylish, wealthy, or prominent enough to be in your presence. That might fly in some places, but not in *this* place.

And yet, when our sinfulness is hanging on us with unbelievable tenacity, we can leave it at the cross and know that that's why Jesus died for us. We don't *have* to be the sort of people who'd rather hobnob with the well-heeled at the expense of those with nothing, nor do we *have* to be indifferent to the obvious needs around us. That's *precisely* the sin that we take to the Lord to forgive, and that's when the change begins.

If that development director is making a beeline for *you*, consider yourself blessed, and remember that some people don't have development directors to solicit donations to their cause. Be generous to them, too.

Amen.