

**Sermon for September 27, 2015 (Proper 21 adjusted, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: James 2:1-13; Psalm 124; Mark 9:38-50

Title: Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

I don't know this for sure, but I imagine that Pope Francis really likes the Letter of James!

Over and over again, this Letter highlights the poor as those who inherit the kingdom of God and also the central importance of mercy.

Our pericope this morning, however, begins with a problem.

And it is a problem that is all too common among human beings – and, in particular, among people of faith.

It is the problem of hypocrisy. It is the discrepancy between our stated beliefs, principles and values – and the reality of our actions.

Every human being is a hypocrite at some level, but people of faith are more vulnerable to this criticism because of our clearly stated values and beliefs.

Remember that these early messianic communities to whom James is writing had professed their belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the long-promised Messiah of God; the Son of David promised by the prophets who would come to set them free.

But, remember also, that this Messiah did not match up with the people's expectations. The Son of David was supposed to be the King! He was supposed to be one wearing gold rings and fine clothes – the one who always gets the best seat in the house!

And yet Jesus came among them as one in dirty clothes, a simple working class man who gave up his home and his career in order to serve those around him.

This is the discrepancy which James is pointing out. If you actually claim to love and serve THIS Messiah, then what in the world are you doing showing favor and honor to the rich?

Now, to be fair, I think that we have to draw some distinction here between our personal lives and our actions as a community of disciples.

Who, in their personal lives, does not favor the rich and the famous?

If Pope Francis came to pay you a visit, don't you think you would expend a bit more energy and effort in hosting him than if a random stranger came to your door?

The instinct to show deferential treatment to those with wealth and power and authority is nearly universal.

In fact, if someone does NOT act in that way, we all will question their sanity!

But things are different within the church – or, at least they are supposed to be. We know how things work “in the real world” of everyday life.

Yes, the rich and powerful get special perks and privileges – even though, ironically, they are the ones who need them least of all! But this is how the world works.

However, in the Church, in the Body of Christ, in the community of people brought together by the love of God in Christ, we are called to embody an alternative reality.

We are here to give shape to a different reality, an alternative universe, where wealth means nothing, where the poor are honored and celebrated, where every action is judged by the standard of loving the neighbor in the same way that we love ourselves.

“If you show partiality, you commit sin.” Two weeks ago, on Welcome Home Sunday, we spoke about how God is described in James as “haplos”: singular, consistent, unchanging, and in this sense also generous due to the equal treatment given to humankind.

Partiality and favoritism are examples of the contrasting double-mindedness of humans who look at the outward appearance and not on the heart.

Now, if you think about it, there seems to be contradictory instruction here in James.

He criticizes his audience for their partiality and favoritism.

But then he also states clearly that God has chosen the poor over against the rich.

Is that not partiality and favoritism expressed by God?

I understand this assertion by James to be primarily an observation.

There is an objective, measurable side to God's choice of the poor to be rich in faith. It always has been the case – in every land, in every culture, in every age – that the poor are the ones who are rich in faith.

Do you know which US state is the most religious? It's Mississippi.

(see <http://www.gallup.com/poll/12091/Tracking-Religious-Affiliation-State-State.aspx>)

Do you know which US state is the poorest? Once again, Mississippi.

(see <http://www.povertyusa.org/the-state-of-poverty/poverty-map-state/#>)

This is no aberration, and the correlation is consistent throughout our nation and throughout the world.

And do you know what else is true?

The plain truth is that the only home for atheism is among the wealthy, and in particular wealthy white Europeans and Americans.

Why is this? Because wealth allows people to live in the illusion that they have everything under control. Therefore, they have no need of God.

When you have wealth and means, then you have your current life in order and all of your future mapped out.

But of course, as we all understand, this fragile illusion crumbles once personal tragedy or financial collapse comes along.

So what does it mean to be poor in the world and rich in faith?

It's not about your net worth or the equity in your home. It is about perspective.

It is about understanding that we possess nothing.

Listen to the words of the great John Chrysostom on this attitude of mind:

“Do I possess the house in which I live? No, it is only on loan to me from God while I remain in that place.

Do I possess the clothes which I wear? No, they are on loan to me until they wear out, or until I give them away to someone in greater need.

Do I possess this body that you see before you? No, it was lent to me by God when I was born, and [God] will take it back when I die.

Do I possess the mind that is composing the words that I speak? No, that too was lent by God at my birth and will go when I die.

So do I possess anything? Yes, I possess the virtues which during my life have grown and flourished within my soul. Inasmuch as I have grown in love, I possess love.

Inasmuch as I have grown in faith, I possess faith.

Inasmuch as I have grown in gentleness, I possess gentleness.

These things are immortal; they are divine gifts which God will [never] take away.”

(On Living Simply: The Golden Voice of John Chrysostom by Robert Van de Weyer, page 29).

Inasmuch as I have grown in love, I possess love.

James turns to the Lord’s summary of the Torah in explaining why acts of favoritism are inconsistent with faith in Christ.

“You do well,” he says, “if you really fulfill the royal law – the Torah – according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (James 2:8).

Our son, Angus, and many of the West Point cadets are in New York City this morning to run the Tunnel to Towers 5K. Of course, I am incredibly proud and happy that he is part of that event intended to support and honor first responders. But the story behind this event is profound. Perhaps you have heard it.

Stephen Siller was a firefighter at Squad 1 in Park Slope, Brooklyn. He had just gotten off the overnight shift and was preparing to go play golf with his brothers. His radio scanner reported the impact of the first plane hitting the North Tower. So Stephen asked his wife to relay the message to his brothers that he would catch up with them later.

He returned to the station and drove the fire truck to the Brooklyn Battery tunnel, but it was already closed. So he strapped on his 60 pounds of gear and ran through the tunnel, weaving through the deadlocked traffic and all the way to the World Trade Center. And then he climbed the stairs, going as far up as he could to help those trapped inside. Stephen Siller never came out.

Both of Stephen’s parents had died before he was ten. They were both devout Catholics and third order (or lay) Franciscans. It is said that, while growing up, Stephen was always surrounded by the vision and ideals of St. Francis of Assisi.

In particular, he embraced this motto attributed to St. Francis: “While we have the time, let us do good.”

Today’s portion of James ends with a profound statement.

“Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13)

This is the same kind of statement which we ourselves make every time that we pray the Lord’s prayer. “Forgive us our trespasses, just as – or in the same way as – we forgive those who trespass against us.”

In fact, when James speaks of those who have “shown no mercy”, the Greek is more evocative. It speaks of those who have “not DONE mercy.”

Stephen Siller was one who DID mercy, who sought to do good, to love his neighbor.

There is nothing abstract or theoretical in James’ approach to the love of neighbor.

It is as clear and direct as where people get to sit on a Sunday morning.

It is as real as choosing to risk life and limb to save others.

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

My friends, to be in Christ is to be one over whom the excellent name of Jesus has been invoked. The name of the One who ran in to the fire of this world to save us.

Since you and I have been shown such mercy, how can we be so cold as to not DO mercy toward those who need it most?

May the Lord - in mercy - deliver us from all of our hypocrisy and cold-heartedness.
Amen.