

“Favoring Faith and Deeds”  
B Pentecost 15, James 2:1-17  
September 5, 2021; 10:00 am  
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO  
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

## **Favoritism Forbidden**

**2** My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. **2** Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. **3** If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” **4** have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

**5** Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? **6** But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? **7** Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

**8** If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,”<sup>[a]</sup> you are doing right. **9** But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. **10** For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. **11** For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,”<sup>[b]</sup> also said, “You shall not murder.”<sup>[c]</sup> If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

**12** Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, **13** because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

## **Faith and Deeds**

**14** What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? **15** Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. **16** If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? **17** In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

### **I. BACKGROUND—BOOK OF JAMES**

My brothers and sisters.....

Suppose someone comes into your community, all decked out in finery and everyone swoons and scurries to roll out the red carpet. They offer him or her the best pew and a pledge card—eager to garner favor so he or she will come back again soon!

Suppose someone comes all the way from Denver, with a beautiful violin piece (or 4) to share!

Suppose some have lots of resources to share—time, talent and treasure, and some have barely the shirt on their back, not enough food for their children on the weekend, or can’t find an affordable place to live.

Suppose we reimagine a concern about “showing favoritism” to “favoring?” Like a horse or dog “favors” their hurt leg, or we pour out TLC food and support to our dear ones who are down for the count? Recovering from surgery and illness and injury. Facing life transitions; grieving losses.

I don’t think we have a problem with “showing favoritism” in our community. I think we have a blessing and an opportunity to practice “favoring” all over the place and are doing a wonderful job of it! Both in our congregation and beyond.

Suppose this little Book of James—a unique piece of wisdom literature in our bible (not an epistle!), written so many

centuries ago to a totally different audience, living through possibly very different circumstances, (or not!) has *much* to say to us today—if we will just dive deep and consider awhile together.

Let's study the Book of James this month—the scriptures for each week are in the September Newsletter. The theme is: “Holding Onto Faith, Hope & Love,” and ties into our reading together “Love is the Way” by Bishop Michael Curry.

We don't know much about James' religious community that he was writing to, actually.

The point of the writing though, is what matters. His audience is an “assembly of the faithful”—in those days—Jesus followers dispersed around the Mediterranean Basin. “A collection of teachings for a developing community of Christ-followers hoping to distinguish themselves from the world by how they live together.” Huh! Does that sound familiar?

They are called to become “an alternative community of care in this world.” As are we.

## **II. FALSE DIVISION—CONGRUENCE**

Today's passage focuses on two key pieces of wisdom: Favoritism and faith *versus* works. What meets the eye is seemingly simple, and has been touted down through the ages by many—but I wonder if we haven't delved-deeply enough down through the ages.

For we have perpetuated an “either/or” approach to so much of life and faith, that really isn't helpful. Is being a Christian about what you *believe* or what you *do*? Prayer and “spiritual things” OR mission projects and service? Studying scripture so you *know* in your head what you should think and believe to get to Heaven, or tending to your soul with prayer and meditation so your heart gets involved?

What I do see and hear in this passage is a call to *show favor* to the least of these. To welcome each soul “wherever they are on life's journey.” Just last night, a friend in Fairplay said she wanted to come to our service sometime. I described our congregation as very warm, open-minded, great people, welcoming and wonderful!

Favoring those who need the warmest welcome vs. showing favoritism to some just because they might be able to do great things for us with their resources—that's what we are called to. And, we are called to favoring that which truly matters and those who need us to care the most.

Valarie Kaur reminds us to see “strangers” as “a friend I have yet to meet. You have a perspective on the world or life experience I have yet to consider. I seek to come to understand you from a place of openness and compassion.” Favoring.

The second “false division” we have read into James over the centuries, that was not meant to be there, was this notion of “faith *versus* works.”

What do you think of when you hear that? Can you ever DO enough for God? Does it raise your anxiety to think it's conditional: IF I do enough, I will earn God's favor and earn my way into Heaven. What happens when we just keep thinking we have to DO more and more? Burnout! Being a Christian Burnout! Human Doing's much more so than Human Beings.

What if we step back and look about a broader understanding of Faith? What it is and what it isn't? What is Faith to you? Intellectual assent to a set of beliefs in your head? Doctrine, dogma, a list of rules or conditions? Or, a sense of Oneness with all that is—the living and breathing of life. Faith is so much more than assent to something in the head. It's a way of life. A stance. A way of being in the world. Walking the walk of faith, being people of faith—a whole 'nother thing. An alternative community—like James was hoping to form.

Faith AND works (or good deeds). It's the walk of faith. Serving and loving one another, God and ourselves. No more either/or. Not a competition. We can't do or be one without the other.

### **III. FRIENDSHIPS ARE HARD—IN LIFE AND DEATH**

We live in a time of such polarization. Of either/or's all over the place. We have to figure out how to stop going down that path. The life of Faith is the walk of both/and, all of the above. We continue down the divisiveness to our own peril—of our hearts and lives. I want to share a personal story of why I believe this in the depths of my being.

We lost a friend this weekend. Our friend, Gabby, came into our lives a few years ago when we realized at a town festival in Fairplay, that the Mayor of Fairplay was Clarke's *doppelganger*.

Shoulder-length white hair, cowboy hats from the Colorado Hat Company, jeans and vests and belt buckles like twins. Similar body build—even comparing pictures of their mothers led us to thinking maybe they *were* twins or at least the moms were sisters they didn't realize they had!

Friends come into your lives via all kinds of pathways. Sometimes through shared interests; others through shared acquaintances. Sometimes, simply because you look alike!

Gabby adopted us into his inner circle, and often referred to us as “my best friends and my pastor.” He threatened to come to church here many times over the years, but always had some excuse—wasn't dressed well enough; didn't get up that early on a Sunday after a late Saturday night—you name it!

Over the years, we realized that Gabby might be in our lives to help us understand views and perspectives not our own. He approached politics and world events quite differently than we do, and often ribbed us about our “leanings.” Once in awhile, we would cross paths and agree on how communities ought to conduct themselves for the good of all. Other times we had to

just “agree to disagree” and set aside political topics and just enjoy being friends hanging out together in a small community.

Honestly, we struggled in our relationship with Gabby—this “brother from another mother”—especially in the last couple years—*because* those political differences masked deeper differences in values and worldview. We had to set some boundaries around places where we were feeling hurt by what he said or proclaimed—either about ourselves or others. Dialogue became more difficult, and we grew further apart over time. We're not sure “who moved” in that growing apart—maybe the world just did!

I know many of you have struggled in similar ways. It's hard to navigate these waters, these days, isn't it? We find ourselves in a time of polarization with our own friends and family. Not just partisan politics anymore, but a struggle of basic values and approaches to life. The pandemic has brought that out more than anything in my lifetime.

Vaccines—good or poison? Masks—protective armor or a violation of individual rights? “Governmental Policies:—for the health and safety of all, or a violation of an individual's agency—whether their face or their womb. “Overreach” is defined very differently, depending on your position in life, class, color, gender, geography, or personal experience.

It's easy to think we can just “hide behind the mask” and cocoon ourselves in, avoiding all this “politics” swirling around us, controversial issues, or crises, but it gets harder every day. On social media you can choose to UNFOLLOW someone if you don't like what they're posting. In our homes we can pick up the remote and click off the television, or at least surf around to a different news channel.

But, in real life, we can't turn it off—the suffering of our brothers and sisters around us. As people of faith, we are called

to hear the cries of the oppressed. To respond to those calling out for justice and support.

Susan Thistlethwaite named what's swirling around us just this week as a *tsunami*! A tsunami of climate catastrophes coast to coast along with human rights catastrophes and a pandemic. Very hard to take, she says. I have to agree.

Why can't we turn off or tune it out, and just live in our little bubble? Because it's *part* of our bubble. Part of our lives, too—in our families and church families and communities.

Not just the suffering and the circumstances, but the divisiveness is right in the middle of our lives. Every one of you has talked to me about a close friend or family member who sees things very differently than you do. Who approaches what's happening in the world with lenses that are quite diverse from your own—who absorbs a different “news feed.”

Those persons in our lives are a challenge. They are also a gift. Though it may be very hard at times to FIND the gift in the midst! On the day our friend Gabby died, we also spent time with another friend who shares many of our values about a spiritual, compassionate approach to life and the world, yet has studied chemistry at a master's level and views vaccines and Covid and masks from a 180 degree perspective than we do.

I like and respect this new friend, and found myself curious about where she was coming from—especially because she *had* studied the science of disease and vaccines. I was also a little “trepidatious” (not sure that's a word!) that the subject might come up and we would get into an argument on a beautiful outing in God's creation on our horses and spoil the day.

I've been thinking a lot lately about how we humbly open our minds, ears and hearts to hearing all these different perspectives, yet clarify our own values and ground ourselves in our own lenses of faith and conviction—looking and acting through lenses of faith, hope and love.

We made some good starts a couple weeks ago in our local community, with the community forum Merilee mentioned last week. Moderator Jim Hight has delved-in Braver Angels training and led us in a fruitful conversation and taught us some basic skills for discussing controversial matters in constructive ways. Watch here locally for more events along these lines that are coming up.

Our CUCC Education Team is exploring “Bridge-Building” education as an important priority for our church as we go into this fall. I encourage you to sign up for and attend Conversations That Matter, starting Sunday, Oct. 3<sup>rd</sup> at 4 pm—live and in person for now.

We will begin with Bridge-Building as an overarching topic on Oct. 3<sup>rd</sup>, and then branch into current events and issues affecting us right here in our community—with an eye and ear toward learning to listen and work together, rather than further the divide into encampments.

#### **IV. AN ACT OF FAITH—RECONCILIATION and MOVING BEYOND REGRET TO RESTORATION**

In the end, we put love and concern for our friend Gabby first and foremost. Of course. At a moment of crisis and tragedy, all that matters is deep love and concern for another being. We did everything we could to let him know that we were surrounding him with love and concern and prayers, as he tried to recover from a horrific motorcycle accident. We are grateful to know that his girlfriend gave him all our love when she was able to visit.

Relationships all have their ups and down, highpoints and tough moments. Regrets come in when we run out of time to keep working through the difficult parts—when the opportunities to try harder to listen, learn together and seek a way to bring new understandings to light—when those golden moments are taken from us by sudden loss. When those opportunities cease to present themselves to us, it is excruciatingly painful.

Regret and remorse are weighing heavily on us right now, as we'd always hoped to find a way to reconcile our differences, and come back together as friends, with a new understanding of how to live and love in this world beyond the news feeds that rain down mantras of fear and "othering" and pit brother against brother.

Resolve comes in when we choose to learn from the regrets and try harder next time. Before it's too late. This is *hard* work. It's an act of Faith AND faithful work and trust in a power greater than ourselves. There is no either/or about it. It takes everything that we have and all that we are—to do this act of faith *and* belief—believing in the hope that it *is* possible—to talk the talk and walk the walk.

To hold to our convictions of compassion and belovedness of all God's creatures and challenge those who would say otherwise. And, to also stay in relationship when those values and convictions are challenged and our hearts are hurting. To navigate the right amount of distance and healthy boundaries is never easy, but we are being given a message to give it a try—for the good of humanity and the planet. And, for the good of our own souls, on either side of the grave.

My brothers and sisters, I am committed to learning how to better walk this walk of faith. To navigate these difficult waters, relationships and times together as humankind. Never again do I want to lose a friend to distance and the grave without reconciliation and heart-to-heart healing. We can walk this journey together, in faith and in deed, with God as our Help and Hope. Amen.