

Poverty, Partiality and Problematic Piety
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Sept. 16, 2012
Rev. John Cleghorn

Texts:

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

James 2:1-17

If I asked you what the essence of your faith is, what might you say? Take a moment and think.... What is your *purest* expression of who you are as a child of God and a disciple and a learner in the way of Jesus Christ? I'll bet several things come to mind. I'd also bet they vary among us.

For many people, it's quiet time with our God – time in prayer or meditation. That's when we feel most in touch with God and when our faith is most in tune. For others it may be reading the Bible, dwelling, even losing ourselves in scripture as the word of our Lord. Others may start with scripture but then turn to challenging commentators that open up the scriptures with new perspectives and interpretations.

Another essential expression of faith for many is the decision they make with their money. How much goes to God and when? Is it sacrificial? Is it the first fruit . . . or the last? Questions like those may define the purity of our faith, at least in part. The same might go with our use of our spiritual gifts, how we budget our time and use of our God-given abilities – whether that is serving the less fortunate, taking a casserole to a family experiencing crisis, caulking and painting the church kitchen or even fighting for social or economic justice.

How do you practice your piety?

Last week we began looking at two scriptures that speak directly to that very question. The first is a proverb, an Old Testament wisdom statement, rooted in the Ten Commandments' call to covenant community and the common good.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor. (22:8-9)

Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;
for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them. (22:22-23)

According to this proverb, God favors the poor and will judge societies that do not live up to their responsibilities to share their wealth.

The second reading comes from the New Testament book of James. It also addresses responsibility for the poor in any society that seeks to follow God. It echoes the proverb in condemning any people of faith who make distinctions along class lines.

And, in some ways, this teaching may be even more challenging than the proverb. It presents a central truth that if we, as individuals or as a society, show partiality toward the “haves” over the “have-nots,” then we have a problem with God and God with us.

Just like that, our piety becomes problematic because we are a nation that draws all kinds of distinctions -- racial and religious, political and geographic, economic and educational and more. We distinguish ourselves in how we dress, what cars we drive, what neighborhoods we live in and what colleges our children attend. We are, in all of these ways, a nation where radical, rugged individualism is the name of the game and the measure of the man. We are a nation where the notion of the common good is considered by many to foster dependence and self-reinforcing “entitlement.”

How, then can we avoid making distinctions and how can we avoid showing partiality, which James calls a sin?

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That, in essence, is the question in our reading from the Book of James, who is traditionally thought to be the brother of Jesus. James wrote this letter to group of new Christians wrestling with what it means to follow Christ, especially in a society that often doesn't. James opens today's verses with a question:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

And before his readers have time to think of an answer, James moves on quickly to another question. I'll take the liberty to put it in modern terms.

Let's say a man rolls up outside your church in a Maserati and enters worship wearing a top-of-the-line Brooks Brothers suit, a Rolex watch and \$1,000-Gucci shoes. Altogether his outfit – just for that one day - equals two monthly mortgage payments on the average American home. That's not counting the watch, which would pay the mortgage for an entire year, or the Maserati, which would pay most mortgages entirely.

Next, a poor person walks in wearing all the clothes he owns. They are ragged and dirty. He hasn't bathed in days.

What, James asks, are you going to do? Are you going to show the rich man to a front pew, where all can see that such a prominent citizen has chosen this church on this day of worship? And, James wants to know, what about the poor man? Are you going to shuffle the poor man to the upper corner of the balcony, where nobody can see him or smell him or have to deal with him?

Well, James presses his readers, what *are* you going to do? Is it conceivable that you will treat the two men exactly the same way, even showing them to the same pew to sit beside each other? Well, what's it going to be, you who say you seek to live in the way of Jesus Christ, who communed with the sinner and the outcast, the leper and the taxpayer, the Samaritan woman and the mentally ill?

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Now let's return to the question we considered at the top of this sermon: What is the essence of our faith? What is the purest expression of our identity as people of God and disciples of Christ Jesus?

For James, the scenario that he lays out in today's reading is the litmus test. It's one that, for many, proves just how problematic our piety can be, if we practice it purely. Because, as James writes, "to show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

If you think about it, friends, we at Caldwell have been given an extraordinary gift. At many churches, today's scripture is only an abstract story. Yet, by the grace of God, it is not for us.

Two years ago, through a set of circumstances that had to include some divine providence, we became partners with the Salvation Army. In about two-weeks' time, with plenty of help from people from across our city, we transformed 5,000 square feet of empty educational space into a welcoming and comfortable shelter. At the time, we

considered it an emergency shelter, a band-aid, really, that would be closed in three months time when other shelter became available. But the need remained. The funders came forth and Caldwell House came to be.

As I said last week, the story of the poor in America is far more than data. But it's amazing how quickly it all adds up as time passes. Consider these totals of what you and our partners have been able to offer:

- 30,000, individual night stays, each the equivalent of keeping one person for one night off the streets.
- 2,000 hearty breakfasts cooked and served by Caldwell folk on Sunday mornings in just the last year.
- Another 2,000 hot Sabbath lunches
- 100 devotional lessons
- 60 Health and Wellness nights through our partnership with Mercy Hospital
- 25 "Back on Track" professional development classes offered in just the last few months.
- And, two wonderful Thanksgiving supper celebrations with our Caldwell House neighbors that the organizers' will never forget.

But, I dare to say that all of that is nothing relative to what this ministry has given us in terms of transformational ministry, new members of the Caldwell family, new friendships and sister sojourners on our shared faith walk.

As our Sunday breakfast chef Randy Hood told me Friday, it's given so many of us at Caldwell "a path to follow," an opportunity to grow in service to others, to understand, even if just a little, what it means to face the enormous challenges our society allows when we don't do enough for our poorest neighbors. It's been a path that leads to the feet of Christ.

As Rev. Rogers quoted Proverbs when she informed us of her decision to restructure her life, "For everything there is a season." Now our season with Caldwell House will be coming to a close. Our partners at Salvation Army, who raise the money to pay for the staff and services around which we've built our ministry, don't see a way forward for the shelter.

Federal, state and local government funders have all shifted their emphasis away from emergency shelters to a strategy called "rapid re-housing." It focuses on getting the homeless into apartments as a first step whenever possible. So, the money just isn't out

there to pay for shelters, even well-run, financially efficient, transitional shelters with supportive services, like several here in Charlotte. That includes Caldwell House. We will have to see how all this works out for the 5,000 men, women and children in our city.

The truth is that we are caught up in a larger system. Caldwell House was, after all, just a band-aid strategy to begin with, a patch in a network of local homelessness agencies. Many leaders in that network harbor deep frustration that our city isn't doing a better job. We have a coalition, a network and a ten-year plan to end homelessness. What we lack as a city is the political will to invest and hold focus on building a coordinated solution that makes the best use of the various agencies and ministries that have responded to what is largely a public policy failure. So say many of those closest to the situation.

As a city, we had a good run with the Democratic National Convention. For a few days there, we were that "world-class city" we've aspired to be. On Friday we broke ground on a new \$54-million baseball stadium Uptown. What's more, the mayor has already begun yet another campaign for the \$120-million streetcar project that would run just a block away.

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking on our ten-year plan to end homelessness. Who, we might ask, is listening?

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Friends, I don't think today's reading from James about partiality speaks only to how we are supposed to act in church. It's about who we are as a community under God. And we fool ourselves if we say that this question James asks is a hypothetical. Every day on our streets we encounter rich people and poor people. And every day we do exactly what James says is a sin ... we show partiality, we favor one over the other.

For us at Caldwell, we still have this gift. Caldwell House will operate through March of next year. That's when the current funding runs out. There is plenty still to do. If you have not allowed this ministry to touch you, I encourage you to do so now. We owe it to these neighbors who are striving to get their lives back on track.

In the meantime, God seems to be calling us into a time of prayer and reflection. We have been changed by this gift we've been given, this chance to serve and walk with our Caldwell House neighbors. We've been given the chance to become better disciples. How will we respond – in action or in advocacy – that our city might walk more closely with the God whom Proverbs says always, always sides with the poor?

Our Lord has never been stingy with opportunities to serve the kingdom for those who listen. No doubt, God is not through with Caldwell yet. So, as we approach the dawn of our second century as a congregation, let us pray and ask: What might we do next to be the body of Christ?

James wrote: "You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

That's a good start. We would do well if we also keep James' other words before us, as a congregation and as a city that loves to think of itself as a community of faith:

"What good is it my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Amen.