

Treat people with favour, not favouritism

Message for Sunday, February 2, 2020
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: James 2:1–13

Children's Message:

Receive the offering before the message. During the offering, someone near the back blows on a trumpet to get attention. They stand up and announce that they are putting in the offering a cheque for \$20,000. Gushing with praise, I go over and thank the person. The church photographer snaps a picture of us together. I announce that we'll put up a plaque on the wall in honour of this person. I do all this seriously, so that people—especially newcomers—might think this is really how we do church around here. After the offering prayer, I have my talk with children...

I hope that you've figured out that my message already started a few minutes ago. What you just witnessed is an example of how the Bible teaches we should *not* behave in church.

The reason people are important is because God made them, not because they have lots of money. We treat everyone as important. *You* are important! That's because God made you, too.

Message "Treat people with favour, not favouritism"

1) Treat everyone the same: with love and respect

James 2:1-4, New Living Translation:

My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim that you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favour some people more than others?

For instance, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewellery, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in shabby clothes. If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, "You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor" — well, doesn't this discrimination show that you are guided by wrong motives?

This Scripture makes me wonder about the practice here at St. Paul's of putting the names of people on a plaque, when they have contributed a certain amount of money to the church. It's one of the first things people see when they come in the door. What kind of

message does that communicate? It seems contrary to the teaching of the Bible. I've been here only a few years, so I don't know the history of how that memorial wall came to be. I just wonder about that.

But that's not the main thing in this Bible passage I wanted to draw our attention to.

The principle here is: don't show favouritism. That could be for anything: someone's skin colour, intelligence, clothing, family, etc. It's not just about discriminating on the basis of wealth. The story about the two visitors—one rich and one poor—is an illustration of the much broader principle: don't be prejudiced. Especially not in the church!

I want to tell two stories of how people who would once be leaders of their nations who experienced racism—or the lack of it—and how that was a turning point in their lives.

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India.

So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with "your own people." Gandhi left the church and never returned. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu."

Tony Campolo, a Christian speaker, tells this story:

It was my privilege once to be on the same speaking docket as Nobel Prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu. Before the service began, I was carrying on the small talk that people usually use to fill the time. Jokingly, I asked the bishop why he wasn't a Baptist. "After all," I said, "here in the United States most black people are either Baptist or Methodist." In a moving story, the bishop explained why he had become an Anglican priest.

He told me that in the days of apartheid, when a black person met a white person on the sidewalk, the black person was expected to step off the pavement into the gutter to allow the white person to pass, giving the white person this gesture of respect. "One day," the bishop told me, "when I was just a little boy, my mother

and I were walking down the street when a tall white man, dressed in a black suit, came toward us. Before my mother and I could step off the sidewalk, as was expected of us, this man stepped off the sidewalk and, as my mother and I passed, tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to her!”

Tutu said, “I was more than surprised at what had happened and I asked my mother, ‘Why did that white man do that?’ My mother explained, ‘He’s an Anglican priest. He’s a man of God, that’s why he did it.’

“When she told me that he was an Anglican priest,” said Bishop Tutu, “I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God.”

I tell these stories to get across the idea of just how amazingly powerful our actions can be. What we do and what we say makes a difference!

Jesus treated everybody with dignity. That’s why Gandhi was so attracted to him. Jesus showed God’s love to everyone he met. Many returned that love with their own love; but many others responded with suspicion and even hatred. But it didn’t change how Jesus treated them.

Bible teacher Daniel Meyer wrote about this:

Down the roads of Palestine there once rode a man who called upon the world to take off their helmets before it was too late. Where the wealthy of his time exploited the penniless, Jesus gathered paupers round him and shared with them what little he had. Where the Pharisees of his day spurned contact with the sick and the social outcast, Jesus searched them out to welcome them in. Where the poor of Judea scorned those who had sold out to the establishment for profit, Jesus drew round him tax collectors and gave them new vision for life. Where the political zealots of his time cursed every soldier of Rome, Jesus praised a Roman centurion for his faith. Where people of any class or clique met, Jesus came offering membership in a community whose only dues were the surrender of one’s heart to his love.

If there is one place in the world where there shouldn’t be any kind of discrimination, it is the church. There is discrimination everywhere else in the world. But the church is one place where, no matter who you are or what your background, you’re welcome.

I like the new signs outside the building. Both of them say, “All are welcome.” And we mean it.

Maybe this is your first time in this church. I want you to know that you are as welcome as someone who has been a member here for seventy years. It doesn’t matter what you wear, how much money you have, your academic background. We don’t care about that stuff; we care about you. We want you to know that you are welcome here.

1) Accept everyone, even if you don’t approve

Do you know why people have a hard time accepting others? They confuse acceptance with approval. There’s a big difference between acceptance and approval. You can accept people without approving of their actions. They may be doing something totally contrary to the word of God, but you can accept them as a person without approving of the sin they’re involved in.

Romans 15:7, New Living Translation:

Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you; then God will be glorified.

This is certainly the attitude which Jesus modelled for us. His enemies smeared his reputation by calling him “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” [Matthew 11:19]. Yet Jesus welcomed this label, and was glad to have this has his reputation.

Wouldn’t it be great if St. Paul’s Church had that kind of reputation! But all it takes to destroy that is pointing a finger, a frown, a snide remark. Let us be a community, not a clique.

Next Steps:

- Pray: Thank God that he welcomes you—yes, even you, with all the wrong things you’ve done!—into his family, the church.
- Now extend the same welcome to everyone here; and invite others to come and see for themselves.
- “3 Minute Rule”: When the service is over, for the first three minutes, you may not speak with any of the people you normally associate with. Reach out beyond your comfort zone.
- This week show love to someone who is different from you.