

Proper 18

Pentecost 15

9 Sept 2012

Our readings for today have some pretty difficult words for us. "Hard sayings" is what they're usually referred to as.

And hopefully by now you know that I'm not here to just explain away the hard sayings we come across. I don't have much of any interest in making the Gospel message more palatable. No interest in sweetening it up to make ourselves feel good.

I want our words and our actions - our faith and our works - to correspond, to agree, with each other.

I've said it before and I'll probably say it a whole lot more before I finally preach my last sermon - but the Christian faith is not an easy faith. What I should say is that there's a lot of ways in which our faith is difficult, but also *many* ways in which it's the easiest, most natural thing in the world.

Through our baptisms, we've been promised the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love. We study Scripture, we pray together, we share in Communion together - we should know beyond a shadow of doubt that our God is the Creator God of Love. And yet, so many things happen in life that make it difficult to live into the holy life we've been promised and that we ourselves have promised to live into.

And so it seems to me that one of our biggest jobs, perhaps our most important job in this day and age, is to try to be clear about what's difficult and what's natural and easy about our faith.

Now, I read things like James' epistle and if I just skim over it, it seems to me to be some kind of diatribe against the rich. And particularly in light of today's reading from Proverbs - it really seems to say the rich are bad and the poor are good.

But, I'll tell you right now that's an easy reading that will lead to a lot of mischief. There's a lot more going on in James than just some "rich v. poor" sort of thing. And I'll tell you what first tipped me off.

As usual, I was reading a commentary and I came across the fascinating statement that when James mentions "a person with gold rings and in fine clothes" he's talking about a very special sort of rich person. Simply put, he's talking about a politician.

Gold rings and fine clothes were limited to only a few select rich men. It seems the words we have for "fine clothes" actually indicate the famous Roman toga. The gold rings and togas were restricted to high ranking politicians or those aristocrats who were running for high ranking office.

So, basically, it really seems to me that what James is getting at here, among other things, is that it isn't simply a matter of rich versus poor. Rather, what James is criticizing is a church which would lavish all kinds of attention on powerful politicians in order to receive some sort of favoritism from them *while at the same time* denigrating, degrading the poor.

You probably don't remember the last words from last week's reading - the words that come immediately before today's reading. The last statement from last week was this - "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

This week we see just how easy it is to become stained by the world. Lavishing attention on powerful politicians just comes so easy - is just so natural - and does so much damage. Here we learn that showing favoritism breaks the royal law, the law of freedom, the Golden Rule to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And yet it must have been so natural for the early Christians.

Remember, from the very beginning they were looked down upon. From the very beginning they were in danger of being persecuted. From the very beginning they must have hoped and prayed for some protection. It's just so natural to seek protection from powerful politicians.

But here's where they went wrong: it's one thing to seek protection from powerful politicians. It's quite another thing to do so at the expense of the poor in their midst. It's one thing to be open and welcoming to powerful politicians - it's quite another thing to *only* welcome powerful politicians.

Worst of all, however, it's one thing to seek protection from human powers when through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have been freed from the fear of death. If they were really seeking some sort of protection, then we know for sure the answer to James' question - do they really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

But, that's not what seems to worry most folks about this passage. From my informal poll, it seems most folks worry that we aren't welcoming enough to poor people. Or rather, in most communities there are certain specific people who occasionally might come to our services and who we are afraid we might not be welcoming enough to.

Basically, what comes to mind is Jesus statement in the Gospel of Matthew that "whatsoever you do to the least of these, you do to me."

But here's where we can begin to see the truly difficult thing about our faith. You see, from what I gather from Scripture, treating the rich better than the poor is almost just as bad as if we were to treat the poor better than the rich.

Certainly Scripture has a lot of nice things to say about the poor. When I was studying at the Roman Catholic school, I actually learned about a particular group of Romans who believe that God in fact gives

preferential treatment to the poor of the world. They say that God demands preferential treatment for the poor.

I'm not so sure about that. Now, to be sure, it's much, much easier to victimize the poor than it is to victimize the rich. But, I think what the Gospel is trying to get across to us is that *everyone* needs to be treated as though they were welcomed brothers and sisters. That is, the Christian church calls for a great equalling of people.

Surely the wealthy politician will feel as though he's not being properly honored if he is asked to sit next to a poor person, but it seems clear to me that what James is trying to get across to us here, and what so much of the Good News of Jesus Christ is trying to get across to us, is that we have to value people *just because each and every one of them is a person*.

Rather than worry about whether we are living into Christ's warning that "just as you did to the least of these, you did to me", I would like to suggest that we focus our attention on living into *another* idea from Scripture - an idea which will drive us forward, drive us to increase our faith rather than worry whether our faith is failing. I would like to suggest that we understand each and every visitor, in fact, everyone we come across today and every day, as quite possibly an angel in disguise.

Perhaps I've been reading a bit too much Benedictine spirituality, but I honestly think what James is trying to get across to us here, is just what the Benedictines believe and what they do - treat every person you come across as if they were the resurrected Christ himself. Welcome strangers into your midst as if you were welcoming Christ himself. Amen.