

Vital Signs: I Had No Church and You Welcomed Me

James 2:1-10

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GR FUMC

Can you remember a time when you were the new person – the stranger -- in the midst of many other people who knew each other?

Were you ever the new kid at school? Or the new employee at a staff meeting? Maybe divorce or death has ended a long-term relationship and for the first time in decades you have had to go to a social event alone. Have you ever walked by yourself into a worship service where you know no one in the church? It is an intimidating experience, even for the most self-confident person.

Mary Molhoek, our Executive Secretary, visited our church for the first time 24 years ago. On her first visit she was greeted by Diane Slay. When she came back the following week, Diane remembered her and welcomed her back. The rest is history. Now Mary knows more people in this congregation than just about anyone else!

Vital churches are welcoming churches.

As we come to the close of our series on Vital Signs, we can look back on what we've learned so far about healthy, growing churches:

- members of vital churches are more than bodies keeping the pews warm, they are connected, active, contributing Christians;**
- healthy churches balance their outreach programs and ministries with other opportunities that nurture and strengthen their members' spiritual lives;**
- vital churches are focused on the purpose and mission of the church; church members understand their identity as the body of Christ in the world.**

In addition, says the Rev. Dan Dick, whose book we are following, vital churches are welcoming, they know how to greet the newcomer. And it doesn't matter who the newcomer is or what she looks like, the welcome is always warm.

It is very difficult for long-term congregation members to judge whether theirs is a welcoming church or not. I know this is true because I have *never* heard someone describe their own church as “unfriendly.” Even members of churches that are dying, that have lost a large percentage of their membership, that can't meet their budget, that have no Children's Sunday School because there are no children, will say “The best thing about our church is that we're so friendly.”

In fact, Dan Dick says that “friendliness seems to be a high value with struggling congregations.” But in many cases, “visitors report that these churches are cold, impersonal, exclusionary, and that they were virtually ignored” when they walked into the sanctuary. (*Vital Signs*, 17) When these folks say “the best thing about our church is that we're so friendly,” what they mean is, “we're so friendly...to each other.”

By contrast, healthy, stable, growing churches are able to be friendly not just with each other, but with each stranger that walks through their door. *Each* stranger: not just the ones who blend in nicely with the congregational “norm”; not just the ones who know how to dress, how to talk, when to sit quietly and when to stand and clap or shout; but *each* stranger. Offering hospitality to someone who looks and acts just like you is really not that hard; offering the same hospitality to someone who looks or acts quite differently is much more of a stretch.

Sally was determined to go to that church this morning, the one just a block away. She had wanted to visit it since she and John had moved into the rental a few months before. John wanted nothing to do with it, but Sally had decided that today was the day. She was going and she was taking the kids, even if she had to carry them on her back.

The service still had not begun as they walked into the vestibule. Just inside, Sally and the two boys met a friendly man who greeted them and noticed only that theirs were new faces. Yet, as they stepped into the sanctuary, others seemed to be noticing more. Everyone looked so nice, so well-dressed. Sally thought of her dress. It hadn't seemed so short the last time she had worn it.

An usher offered to help them find a seat. Sally declined and started down a side aisle towards an opening. When they had almost sat down, a lady reached over the pew and suggested that the seats were taken. By that time, 8 year old Bobby did not want to move. Sally smiled as best she could and dragged the boys a few more rows forward. She found three seats there in the middle of the pew. Maybe she should have let the usher seat them.

The service began. Thankfully the boys were quiet, awed by the sanctuary's majestic trappings. The music was nice and she knew one or two of the songs. The prayers and other words were not very easy to understand, but her senses were already too filled to notice. The sermon was good. She liked the preacher with the big smile and the strong voice. At one point in his lesson he made a comment about sin with which she strongly agreed. Like Grandma who took her to church years

ago, Sally shouted “Amen!” Then it seemed like one hundred faces turned toward her, her boys included.

Sally didn’t remember much of the rest of the service. The boys had become fidgety and it took all she had to keep them marginally quiet. When it was over, Sally and the boys tried to work their way out quickly. Once or twice she thought of introducing herself, but the faces close by were always turned away. It was as though everyone had someone else they needed to talk to.

When Sally and the boys made it to the door, she turned them away from the parking-lot side of the building to walk the longer way home. They didn’t object too much; they had been freed from the too-quiet hour of sitting still. Besides, they were pretty sure that they wouldn’t be coming back. (Payne, 17-18)

Showing partiality towards those who are like you isn’t a new problem – it’s not a new problem for the human race and it’s not a new problem in the church. Even in the earliest 1st century church community in Jerusalem, it was a problem. James, the church’s leader wrote about it:

“My brothers and sisters, if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? You do well if you really fulfill the scriptural law, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.”

Favoritism in the church is forbidden. Partiality is prohibited. The Greek word translated as “favoritism” or “partiality” means literally to “lift up your face.” You show favoritism for a person by lifting up your face. You would lift up your eyes, lift up your cheeks, lift up your smile, and your expressive face would come alive. (Markquart) Or, as someone wrote many years ago:

**Full many people go to church, as everyone knows;
Some go to close their eyes, and some to eye their clothes.**

**[quoted in Hughes from Halloch and Heicher,
Doran’s Minister’s Manual (Harper & Brothers, 1941), 396]**

We live in a society that judges people according to their age, size, race, gender, sexual orientation, physical attractiveness, clothing, education, community status, intelligence, bank account, and neighborhood, just to name a few. Without thinking, we size people up, and judge them accordingly.

James’s point is that “in Christ’s church, everybody, regardless of where he sleeps or how she dresses, is somebody. In Christ’s church, nobody is better than anybody else.” God does not show favoritism for the rich, therefore we, God’s people, must not do that either. Rev. David Hughes says “We will always notice differences between people. But we dare not assign lower and higher values to them based on what we see. In the Christian church, it is Jesus, seated at the right hand of the Father, who occupies the best seat in the house. The rest of us sit shoulder-to-shoulder, side-by-side on the perfectly level ground at the foot of the cross.” (Hughes)

James took it even a step farther: “Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters,” he wrote. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith

and to be heirs of the kingdom?" God treats all people the same. But God's face lights up and smiles when God sees the poor. God holds the poor in special regard. Does that mean that God loves the down and out more than the up and in? No. Does it mean that God is always pulling extra hard for the underdogs of this world? Yes!

When James says, "God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom," he sounds pretty radical, until you remember that none other than Jesus himself said, "Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20).

Does that mean that material poverty is a biblical ideal, a goal God wants us to aim at? No. God does not desire that anyone suffer from hunger, neglect or the inability to lead a meaningful life because of lack of education or resources.

Does that mean that the poor are, simply because they are poor, better people than the rest of us? No. The poor sinfully disobey God in the same ways that we wretched middle-class sinners do.

Does this mean that God cares more about the salvation of the poor than the salvation of the rich? No God cares equally about everyone's salvation. To be sure, as Ron Sider says, the poor are generally more ready than the rich to grasp and accept Christ's good news. Jesus' comment comparing the camel going through the eye of a needle with the rich person entering the Kingdom of God still carries the sting of truth. But that doesn't mean God cares more about one soul than another.
(R. Sider)

When we read the story of God's actions in human history, though, what we see from beginning to end are demonstrations of God's special concern for the poor. From the escape of the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, to the prophets warnings about the downfall of the nation that didn't care for its poor, to the incarnation of God as a vulnerable baby born to poor, refugee parents, God has said, over and over "It is the poor of the world who are rich in faith. They are heirs to my kingdom. When you welcome them, you welcome me."

According to James, keeping God's law is all one piece. Actions and words need to work together instead of contradicting one another. Saying the right words about love for neighbor but failing to *act* out your love for your neighbor is the same as remaining faithful to your spouse but committing murder. Regardless of what we do or say at 8:30 or 11:00 A.M. Sunday morning, if we neglect the poor and oppressed, we are not the people of God.

Worshiping God and welcoming the stranger are both part of living faithfully.

It's easy to be welcoming as the pastor. People come to me. Visitors and church members alike line up at the end of the service and allow me the opportunity to greet them. Even when I'm the one initiating the contact, people tend to respond positively when you have a robe on or when your name is in the bulletin.

The real work of welcoming is done by you, the congregation.

Opportunities to welcome others don't only happen in worship. There are many other "entryways" into our church, if one feels welcomed: concerts, Celebration of the Arts, Heartside picnics and breakfasts, special speaking events,

the Second Best Sale, the Work Program. And, of course, there's Sunday morning worship, probably the most common place for visitors to "try out" a church.

Rev. David Hughes tells the story of an old, dignified usher who served in a large, downtown church in the 1960s. One Sunday, when the church was packed, a long-haired, bell-bottomed, barefoot hippie walked into the service. Finding nowhere to sit, the hippie sauntered down the center aisle before an usher could stop him. In fact, he walked to the front of the sanctuary and sat cross-legged on the floor before the pulpit as the pastor preached.

Then, the dignified Head Usher sprang into action and strode to the front of the church. The entire congregation tensed as they awaited the inevitable confrontation between this impeccably dressed pillar of the church and the "flower child" hippie. Folks were confident the kid would be shown the back door in a hurry. You can imagine their surprise when the usher came alongside the hippie and sat down, cross-legged, in his three-piece suit, next to the unexpected visitor for the rest of the service.

Every person in the church smiled. Because that day they knew that Jesus, and Jesus alone, had the best seat in that house.

References

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Flattering the Rich, Exploiting the Poor

Labor Day 2006

For Sunday September 10, 2006

Lectionary Readings ([Revised Common Lectionary](#), Year B)

Proverbs 22:1–2, 8–9, 22–23 or Isaiah 35:4–7

Psalms 125 or Psalm 146

James 2:1–10, (11–13), 14–17

Mark 7:24–37

Barbara Ehrenreich earned a PhD in biology but has made a career as a writer, authoring a dozen books and articles for *Time*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *The New Republic*. Over lunch one day she and her editor were pontificating about American poverty, welfare reform and the like, when she wondered aloud how an unskilled but fully employed worker could survive on low wages: “Someone ought to do the old-fashioned kind of journalism—you know, go out there and try it for themselves.”

When Ehrenreich's editor called her bluff she began an economic experiment that resulted in her bestseller book, *Nickel and Dimed; On (not) Getting By in America* (2001). For six months she lived the life of an unskilled but fully employed wage earner. In Florida she worked as a waitress on the 2:00-10PM shift, then as a house cleaner for Molly Maid. In Maine she worked as a “dietary aide” at a nursing home and as a hotel maid. In Minnesota she clerked at Wal-Mart, the largest private employer in the nation with 825,000 people on the payroll. Although she admits that her experiment was artificial in many ways, Ehrenreich lived in budget motels and dangerous trailer parks, she ate only what she could afford (which tended to be fast food), she discovered that she really needed two such unskilled jobs just to squeak by, and overall found herself physically and emotionally drained. And God help her if she ever got sick or needed health care.

The unskilled wage earners that Ehrenreich imitated are the fully employed, not the lazy, the destitute, the unemployed or those who abuse welfare. They constitute about 30% of the American work force who earn less than \$10 per hour (cf. the Economic Policy Institute). They are the people we pass every day who make our American way of life possible. They clean our office buildings at night, serve us at restaurants, repair our cars, sew our designer garments, handpick our fresh produce, and mow-n-blow suburban yards. Even though these people work long and hard, they barely make ends meet. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, “in the median state a minimum wage worker would have to work 89 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing.” In fact, Ehrenreich's colleagues routinely worked more than one job, slept in cars, and crowded multiple people into small living quarters.

With the federal minimum wage at \$5.15 per hour (it was last raised in 1996), the challenges that the working poor face are immense, complex, and interrelated. In his similar study of the same people, Pulitzer Prize winner David

Shipler avoids blaming politics of the left or the right and instead notes how poverty is both a cause of problems and the result of problems: “A run-down apartment can exacerbate a child’s asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother’s punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing” ([*The Working Poor; Invisible in America*, 2004](#)).

While some people blame the poor for their economic plight, and at least some poor people would deserve their lot, the lectionary readings this week offer a politically-incorrect perspective. The psalmist (Psalm 146), Proverbs, and the epistle of James all blame the rich for the plight of the poor. Rich people, they say, oppress, exploit, and plunder the poor "because they are poor," for their own advantage, and if that is not enough, they "crush" them in courts of law. With powerful forces like that, poor people often cannot control their own destinies.

The epistle of James thus considers it a bitter irony that some early Christians actually favored the rich. He pictures an early church where believers favored rich people who were dressed in fine clothes and expensive jewelry. They offered them the best seats in church, then patronized the poor and the poorly dressed by seating them where they would not offend anyone. "You have insulted the poor," writes James. "Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?" (James 2:6–7). Later in his epistle he turns up the heat even higher. These rich people, he says, hoard wealth instead of sharing it, live in luxury while withholding wages from workers, and glory in their indulgence. Whereas people often intimate that their wealth is a sign of God's blessing, James compares their wealth to a toxic chemical that has "corroded" their character and will "burn their flesh like fire" (James 5:1–6).

Perhaps it is human nature to flatter the rich and to demonize the poor. Even monks who renounced great wealth struggled with rationalizing their flattery of the rich. As a Christian in ministry I've raised my own support for over fifteen years, so I've always loved the biting satire of Saint Neilos the Ascetic (d. 430): “We [monks] come fawning to the rich, like puppies wagging their tails in the hope of being tossed a bare bone or some crumbs. To get what we want, we call them benefactors and protectors of Christians, attributing every virtue to them, even though they may be utterly wicked.” Evagrius considered it a trick of the devil to befriend the rich on the pretense of helping the poor: “[The devil] suggests that we should attach ourselves to wealthy women, and advises us to be obsequious to others who have a full purse. And so, after deceiving the soul, little by little he engulfs it in avaricious thoughts and then hands it over to the demon of self-esteem. The latter calls up in our imagination crowds of admirers who praise the Lord for the works of mercy we have performed.”

Christians should favor the poor not because of any political agenda of the right or left, but because we're called to imitate the character of God. Using a legal metaphor, Proverbs says that God is the Maker of the poor, their advocate, and their vindicator who will "take up their case" (Proverbs 22:2, 23). James adds that

God has specially chosen the poor to be "rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him" (James 2:5).

As a relative latecomer to the Gospel (he converted on the road to Damascus about the year 35 AD), the Apostle Paul traveled to Jerusalem about fourteen years after his conversion in order to present his credentials to the original group of Apostles. He knew that he needed their imprimatur, and indeed he received what he calls "the right hand of fellowship" from the movement's leaders. Later, when he recalled this trip in his letter to the Galatian believers, Paul wrote something revealing about the first followers of Jesus. What did the leaders of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem require of Paul? "All they asked was that we should remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do." (Galatians 2:10).

For further reflection:

- What has been your experience with both rich and poor people?
 - * How can Christians best help the poor?
 - * How do the rich plunder, exploit, crush, and oppress the poor?
 - * For further study see the specifically Christian works by Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (1977); Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power* (1954); Justo Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth; A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (1990), and Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches; A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (1999).