



No Partiality Joyner_Pentecost_14 2009

The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost - September 6, 2009

"No Partiality"

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I grew up in a Baptist church in Virginia, where I was a member of the junior choir – a fact that probably surprises my colleagues here and Dr. Quinn – at my previous parish in New York, I was asked not to sing within the hearing of the rector. One of our junior choir anthems was "Be Ye Doers of the Word," taken from last week's lesson from James. It went (and I won't sing):

*Out of James one twenty-two,
Comes a call for Juniors true,
Who will live for Christ the risen Lord.
Listen to this trumpet call,
Ringing out to one and all:
Be ye doers of the word.*

The chorus goes on with "Be ye doers of the word" four or five more times.

With this emphasis on doing, it is somehow appropriate that, here on the Sunday before Labor Day, the Revised Common Lectionary continues with a reading from the Letter of James, and with his effort to unify faith and works. It's a book that barely made it into the New Testament, and which Martin Luther later called an "epistle of straw lacking the wheat of the gospel" because he thought it strayed from the message of salvation through grace alone, and because Jesus is mentioned only twice in its 108 verses, including the first verse in today's lesson. The last verse of today's lesson is the one that particularly offended Luther: "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." And yet, the Letter of James was included in the canon of scripture, and Luther was not even able to rid the church now named for him of it. James's point, I think, is not that we are going to be measured by how many deeds we do, but that our faith is not just in what we say or what we believe, but in how we live – it's the faith that operates in our lives.

But in the beginning of today's passage, James is on another point – or a variant of his main point. In his own insistent way, James lays out for us a practice that he recognized in his day, in the church, and that we all struggle to rid ourselves of today – in the church, and in the rest of our lives: partiality – treating the poor differently from the rich; treating those of a different race, or origin, or religion differently than we treat those whom we perceive as more "like us." Partiality is even something that has been enshrined in our worship. We all love the hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful," but probably are glad that the original second verse has been omitted in our hymnal:

*The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate:
God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.*

I would submit that all of us are struggling to rid ourselves of partiality – do we think that we are better than those from other parts of the country, or of a color different from ours? Do we think we're better because we are Episcopalians? Do we think that Carolina is better than Duke, or vice versa? (Don't answer that!) James cautions us against this – he even says that if we show partiality we commit sin.

The point of James is reinforced in the first lesson from Proverbs: "The rich and the poor meet together; the Lord is the maker of them all." We are all created alike by God, so we should recognize a part of ourselves, not only in each other, here, but in the person on the street we turn away from, the nameless person who

waits on us at a store; we recognize in each other the face of our brother or sister.

You may have noticed that so far I have avoided the gospel lesson. It is a difficult lesson, because Jesus seems to be joining in the practices that James condemns – he seems to show partiality, he does make distinctions between the Syrophoenician woman, a Gentile, and the "children," who in Matthew's version of the story are called "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus is perhaps "on break" because he does not want people to know he is there, and he gets irritated with the woman, even, effectively, calling her a dog! And although we know, and assert here weekly, that Jesus lived among us, yet without sin, he seems to come close to running afoul of the later-delivered admonition of James, who by tradition is his own brother: if you show partiality, you commit sin.

But what really happens here? Jesus does heal the woman's daughter; he does cast the demon out. He travels through the Gentile territories of the Decapolis, signifying his calling as savior of the word, not just of the Jews. And he never again in Mark's gospel refuses help to anyone. This is, in a sense, a conversion experience for Jesus, a turning point. Before this encounter, he is hiding, he is sometimes secretive, he is developing his ministry step by step. After this encounter, he doesn't put restrictions on his healing and saving. Fully human, he is living into his ministry, and now sees it as it is: a mission to the whole world.

As Jesus' ministry develops, so does ours, for each of us has a vocation, each of us is called, at our baptism, to hold the faith and to live the faith. In the office (really a cubicle) where I work during the week, I am surrounded by various pictures of my family, cartoons, maps, and wise sayings of those who have gone before. One of them, attributed to John XXIII, is his response when asked what he was called to do as Pope: "See everything. Overlook a great deal. Improve a little." That's what we are called to do as well – that's part of our vocation. Vocation, or calling, is something we think of as connected with the church, as in a calling to ordination, or to the religious life. But we are all called. We are not all called to do everything, but all of us are called to do something.

Someone said of this lesson that this is the day the gospel goes to the dogs. But the day the gospel goes to the dogs is also the day the gospel comes to us, for we are in a sense the heirs of the Syrophoenician woman. We are outsiders, Gentiles, maybe, like she was, asking no more than crumbs from the table. The good news in today's gospel, the good news from James, the good news from Proverbs, is that we are not dogs under the table. We get to sit at the table with the children, with the woman, with those to whom Jesus was sent. Remember, in this lesson Jesus does heal the woman's child, showing no partiality, and never again does he refuse to heal anyone who comes. The woman who is called a dog becomes a guest at the table, and there is enough there for her, for us, and for the whole world.