

“Judgment Free Zone”
James 2: 1-10, 14-17
Sunday September 9, 2018

Five-year-old Brian had a pivotal verse to recite in an Easter program: *“He is not here, he is risen”* (Luke 24:6). Unfortunately, he could not remember what to say, and the director had to quietly remind him of his line. He then confidently grabbed the microphone and triumphantly shouted, “He’s not here; He’s in prison!” (Taken from Sermon Illustration: Humor/Ministry 127)

Let us pray?

The poor fellow, that James uses to illustrate his point. Maybe he had been in prison. Whatever, his status or lack thereof, he comes to church right behind a multibillionaire. He is relegated to the floor while the other gets one of the few seats.

In Jesus’ day, the assembly place was called the synagogue which literally means gathering place. Seats were carved into the wall of the synagogue. The wealthy were invited to sit on the stone benches. The poor brought mats. They were invited to sit on the dirt floor or sometimes a tile floor.

As people came to the Synagogue for worship, there would be a container of water just before you entered the synagogue, in which they washed their hands before entering for worship. One was to be clean before entering the Synagogue. It makes me wonder if the Catholic tradition of dipping their hand into the water and making the sign of the cross is in fact something that was carried from our Jewish roots.

As one entered the Synagogue one found a place to be seated. There may have been the ruler of the Synagogue who was there to greet you. He did not rule the Synagogue as much as he was the head Trustee in that he took care of the property, the head of the worship committee

which insured that the liturgist was in place to lead the scripture readings and the prayers, and located who was going to preach that week. It could be a member of the congregation who was a male 13 years and older. Often times in Jesus' day, there were traveling Rabbis in the area on the Sabbath. This "ruler" of the Synagogue would line up a traveling Rabbi to speak. The sermons were short.

Remember in scripture where Jesus goes to His home town on the Sabbath. He had been selected by the "ruler" of the Synagogue to speak. Jesus read the scripture from Isaiah which began with the words that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord when people would be healed and set free from the things that imprisoned them. When Jesus was done reading these words, He said to those gathered in the Synagogue that today these words are fulfilled in your hearing. End of sermon and unfortunately the beginning of much uproar.

I remember being at a continuing education training while in the military. A general was coming in the building as I was preparing to exit the building. He stopped for a moment and said to me. We call the male chaplains "Padre." What do we call the female chaplains? I told him "Madre."

In these early Christians came out of this context and saw Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. So they have services just like in the Synagogue. So here is the poor guy coming to a service where Jesus is lifted up as Messiah, and he is shown the floor. People already have the preconceived notion that he is poor and doesn't have much contribution to make to the community. Church is over and people began to notice that his clothes are in rags. He looks hungry. They greet him with these absurd words: Go in peace, Keep warm, and eat your fill.

Interspersed, in this narrative, is this concept of love as opposed to judgment. Jesus' one rule was the law of love. Love God, love neighbor, as yourself. If one loves one's neighbor, then there is no partiality. The Greek word here has the meaning of, "I have considered the matter

and have judged it so.” You are not that valuable. Go stand in the back or sit on the floor.

James had to straighten these young Christians out. They had brought the way they understood worship and fellowship to be. They weren’t being responsive to the Holy Spirit. They were being like what they came from.

Actually, many of us are like these early Christians. We go to church with an expectation that Church will be like what we have experienced Church to be.

As a pastor, it has come home to me every time I change churches. It may to you every time you change pastors.

I remember most clearly at one Church that people would call me and expect me to give them an answer about a financial thing. In their experience the pastor holds the purse strings of the church. When I said that I would have to check with the others, they were frustrated at times. After all wasn’t I the decision maker?

In our system, the pastor does have some leeway within guided parameters. She doesn’t have to call every time the church is going to spend some money.

At the same time, our book of rules called the Book of Discipline, says that I cannot sign a contract. I cannot contractually obligate the church to anything. It has to be signed by the chair of Trustees or her delegated representative.

I have other people who have come to various churches that I have serviced and act as if I was like a priest. In the Hispanic culture it is not unusual for the church members to greet the priest with a kiss on the hand as he leaves the church. The same thing happened when this elderly man started attending a church I pastored. As he walked out of church, I would have the back of my hand kissed each week.

We all come with expectations about what Church should be. James reminds us that Jesus’ requirement was that we respond to people of His love. Prejudging people as to what they give or bring to the table is not love. A person’s value in the Kingdom of God and thus in the church

is not what they look like, their mental acuity, or what they can contribute toward the good of others. Each who darkens the door of the church is of sacred worth irrespective of how they present themselves.

Second, the love Jesus means is we stop judging. My family and I joined a gym together. We got up early and went to the gym. In that gym there were letters on the wall. The three words meant a lot not only to me, but most importantly to my husband. It said, "Judgment Free Zone."

Is that what James was trying to get across to those early Christians? Was he trying to tell them that pre-judging people and partiality were incompatible with the love of Jesus? In fact, it seems that James was saying that this faith that they profess to have in Jesus as their Savior was worthless if they are not responsive to the needs of others.

When I was growing up in El Paso, I remember going on a youth trip with a bunch of younger boys who came from rich families. They were making jokes about Hispanics. They called them wet backs. They talked about them as illegal aliens. I said nothing. I didn't laugh at them. I just hoped they would stop. I didn't say hey or ask questions.

The boys had no knowledge of the people they spoke of. Most of us only knew people who were Hispanic as maids and yardmen. We had no idea of the intelligence, talents, or personhood of the people that they had prejudged. That prejudice and my silence were not expressing my love of Jesus. I was not expressing the love of Jesus that was in my heart.

One of the greatest signs of love in a church is the interest we take in others when we are together in fellowship. Who do you not know? I know, not everyone is an extravert. I know that we want to talk with our friends. The gift of salvation from Jesus calls us to exercise that faith by finding ways to speak to others we don't know. What if you and another person you feel comfortable with talk with someone you don't know?

Is that not one way to show the love of Jesus? If we practice that here, would that make it easier when we are out and about in our world?