

## **PENTECOST 16B – 9/2/18**

### *No Favorites*

**(James 2:1-10, 14-17)**

Lillian Weiss was her name. When I came to serve St. Paul Lutheran Church in Augusta, Kentucky – as a young pastor fresh out of seminary – Lillian, a widow, was already in her mid-70's and a longtime member of the congregation.

Now I will always remember Lillian for two things. For one thing, she was the very first person who ever voted for me for bishop. (In case you're wondering, there've only been two!) As some of you know, at the synod assembly when you're voting for a new bishop, the first ballot is, in a sense, a "nominating" ballot. In other words, the delegates can vote for any pastor they choose. And all those who receive at least one vote then appear on the *second* ballot.

Well, one year, Lillian was our delegate – our only one, in fact. And after the first ballot for bishop, when they put up on the screen the names of everyone who had received at least a single vote, I noticed that my own name was among them! Needless to say, I was quite taken aback and also a little confused. After all, I was just a young pastor and, what's more, brand new to that synod. In short, pretty much no one knew who I was.

Seeing the surprised look on my face, Lillian nudged me and said, "I voted for you." I turned to her and said, "Really?" She nodded. And, for the briefest of moments, I swelled with pride over the idea that one of my parishioners thought so highly of me that she actually cast her ballot for me as bishop. Bishop! Pretty heady stuff!

But, as I say, it was only for a *brief* moment. You see, after pausing for a just a second, she quickly went on to explain the *reason* for her vote... “I just didn’t *know* any other pastors,” she said matter-of-factly. And, with that, as you can imagine, my short-lived bubble was forever burst!

The second, and most *important*, thing I will always remember Lillian Weiss for had to do with how, as a young bride, she forever changed St. Paul Lutheran Church. You see, up until that time, their worship service was segregated; not only by race, mind you (although back in the 1930’s there was that reality as well), but rather by *gender*. In other words, the men sat on one side of the church during the service. And the women sat on the other. Not even married couples sat together.

Well, Lillian had not been born and raised at St. Paul’s. Instead, she and her family belonged to a nearby Disciples of Christ Church, and she only became a member at St. Paul’s after she married her husband. In fact, when her own pastor caught wind of the news that she was not only going to *marry* a Lutheran, but also *join* her husband’s church, he immediately drove out to her parent’s farm and told her, in no uncertain terms, that if she went through with such a thing then she was going straight to... you know where! (It begins with “h” and rhymes with “bell.”)

Now the Lillian I had come to know was a pretty feisty, no-nonsense, individual. And I can only imagine, therefore, what she must have been like as a young woman. So apparently she was not at all intimidated by her pastor. Rather, she went through with the marriage, as planned, and also with her intention to join her brand-new husband’s church as well.

Here's the thing, though. On the first Sunday after they were married, she dutifully honored that longstanding custom of the men sitting on one side of the church, and the women on the other. But, that very next week, she told her new husband – in no uncertain terms of her *own* – that if she was going to “you know where” in the next life for marrying him, then she was *darn sure* that she was going to sit next to him at church in *this* life!

So, guess what? The *next* Sunday, that's exactly what she did. All the men – plus Lillian – sat on one side of the church. And all the women sat on the other.

However, by the following week – just the third Sunday after her wedding – the worship service, for the very first time, was fully and, thereafter, forever integrated! That longstanding custom no longer existed, and the artificial barrier between men and women was utterly and completely broken; with husbands and wives now sitting together, and people of both genders now sitting on *both* sides of the church.

All because of Lillian! Is that cool, or what?

Well questions of “who sits where,” and “how people are treated,” are apparently not new questions for the church. As we heard in our reading from James this morning, such “practical” questions go all the way back to the very beginning...

Now, for the benefit of those who were not here last Sunday, this is the second week of a five-week sermon series on the book of James, who was one of the early leaders of the church. And, as we learned last week, *this* James was actually not one of the two disciples of Jesus with

that name; otherwise known as James “the Greater” and James “the Lesser,” as befitting their relative importance among the twelve. No, this James was actually the younger brother of Jesus himself!

As I shared last week, Matthew 13 records for us that moment (it’s also recounted in Mark 6) when Jesus came to his own hometown and began to teach in the synagogue, and the people were astounded, saying, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers *James* and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?” In other words, in addition to some unnamed sisters, Jesus had four brothers as well. And James, it’s also assumed, was the *oldest* of Jesus’ four younger brothers since his name is listed *first*...

Well, interestingly enough, the only *other* times we hear about James in the gospels (although not actually referred to by name), are in a couple of passages where Jesus’ siblings were apparently not very supportive of him or his ministry. In Mark 3, just after Jesus had been healing and the crowds were beginning to mob him, and the scribes were saying that he was possessed by the devil, we read, “When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him.”

Concerned for his safety, and perhaps even his sanity, a few verses later, we hear, “Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him.” This message, then, was conveyed to Jesus, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” Again, they were concerned; maybe even a little worried about him.

In other words, there was apparently a period of time, again early in Jesus' ministry, when his relationship with his family was a little strained. But think about it. Think about how difficult it must have been for his family, including his brother James, to accept and to understand what Jesus was now doing with his life; this ministry that he had embarked upon. Even more to the point, John 7:5 tells us, quote, "For not even his brothers *believed* in him," end quote...

The next time we hear about James, however, is in 1 Corinthians 15, where St. Paul writes, "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (which was that other name for Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still living, although some have died. Then he appeared to *James*... then to all the apostles." This, again, is James the brother of Jesus...

Time passes. Years go by. And now we hear from Paul in Galatians 1, "Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas (again Peter) and stayed with him fifteen days, but I did not see any other apostle except *James* the Lord's brother."

In other words, early on James and Jesus' other siblings, even Mary herself apparently, had some real concerns and misgivings about his ministry. As we heard, they didn't even believe in him it seems; at least not at first. As children they may have been very close. But *then*... not so much. They were a little distant; to say the least.

But after the *resurrection*... and in his subsequent appearances to that assortment of apostles and believers (according to Paul), the risen Christ also appeared, as we heard, to *James*; that is, to his brother. And something very profound and life-changing must have happened during that experience. Because the very *next* thing we hear about James is that now he's counted among the apostles in Jerusalem. *Not only that*, but in Acts 15, at the Jerusalem Council, where they were considering the question regarding the admission of Gentiles into the church, who was it that *speaks* for the entire church? *It was James!*

Filling in the blanks, the Roman historian, Eusebius, later recorded that, "This James, whom the people of old called the Just because of his outstanding virtue, was the first, as the record tells us, to be elected to the episcopal throne of the Jerusalem church." Or to put it another way, Jesus' brother James, at first skeptical and disbelieving, later not only became a *believer*, but actually became a *leader* in the early church as well; the very first bishop of Jerusalem, in fact! (I'm guessing he got *more* than one vote.)

And it was this James, the brother of Jesus – who became the first bishop of the church in Jerusalem – who is *also* credited with writing the New Testament letter that bears his name. The letter from which today's second reading comes from, and the letter that we will continue to focus on, not only again this morning, but in the next three weeks as well.

One other thing I want to share with you before I make some brief points about today's reading. One more thing that you should probably know; which will put everything that we'll be considering in this sermon series into perspective. And it's simply this. James, Jesus' brother, unlike Peter and Paul, and most of the other first apostles, was *not* a

missionary. That is, he didn't go out into the world to preach the gospel and convert people to the faith. Rather, he stayed on in Jerusalem and worked closely with the Christians who were already there, helping them to *live out* the faith instead. So, as bishop, he was more of a *pastor*, then, as opposed to a missionary.

So what we're going to discover, as we continue to delve into the book that bears his name, is that instead of great *theological* arguments – such as we find in Paul's writings, for instance – the Letter of James is much more *pastoral*. It's pretty much a book of practical wisdom and advice on how to put the Christian faith into action; “Just Do It” as we heard last week. In other words, how to “live out” that faith in practical, every day, (dare I say) even *ordinary* ways. A “how-to” guide, if you will. Now back to our reading...

This passage is probably *most* or *best* remembered for its final verse: “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” As Lutherans, of course, all kinds of alarms go off, and red flags are raised, whenever we hear something like this. What do you mean “faith without works” is dead? Didn't Paul himself say that we are justified by grace *through* faith, and not by works of the law? Where does James, even if he *is* Jesus' brother, get off by saying that faith without works is dead?

The answer, however, is simple. It begins with context. Keep in mind here; this observation that faith without works is dead occurs at the very *end* of our reading this morning, not the beginning. As a result, it's a conclusion based on a preceding set of circumstances; namely that, apparently, there were overt acts of favoritism and instances of showing partiality in those early church gatherings. Distinctions were being

made. The wealthy, it seems, were *warmly* welcomed, while the poor were virtually ignored...

During my first call down in Kentucky, in addition to St. Paul's, I also served Trinity Lutheran Church in nearby Maysville. And, believe it or not, there was a tradition of segregation here as well; again, not simply along racial lines (although that was certainly true as well), or even according to gender as it was at St. Paul's. No, here the segregation was based on *class*.

You see, over the years, the congregation in Maysville had largely been made up of folks who worked at the local bicycle factory. In fact, during the Great Depression, the owners of this bicycle factory – who were Lutheran – actually used to recruit workers throughout the Midwest by promising young men jobs if they would also come and join their church at the same time. And, being that it *was* during the Great Depression, the strategy worked, and that's how they grew the congregation.

Now where the issue of segregation came into play *here* was that, again on Sunday mornings, instead of men and women being separated like at St. Paul's, it was the *owners* and *top management*, and their families, who sat on one side during worship. And the *workers*, and *their* families, who sat on the other side. And, while these separations and distinctions had largely broken down and disappeared over the years, and while there were now members of the congregation who *did not* work at the bicycle factory; when I first came to serve Trinity, the owners and one of their top managers still sat on one side. And the few employees who were left, that were still members, sat on the other side. Old habits die hard, I guess.

But here's the thing about *this* congregation. Just as it is here at Hope, when people came up to receive communion – from both the left and also the right sides of the congregation – they knelt down at the communion rail *together*; side by side, shoulder to shoulder. And I remember when it struck me for the first time, as I prepared to distribute the sacrament. Maybe in life there were differences and distinctions. But not at the altar. Not during communion. Here they were all equal. They were all sinners in need of forgiveness. And that forgiveness, received in the body and blood of Jesus Christ, was made available to *all*, regardless of wealth or status or position...

But it's even *more* than that, says James. "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what good is that?" And it's at this point, and *only* at this point, that James then points out the obvious. Faith all by itself, he says, especially if it's simply a belief or some sort of intellectual exercise, that is not backed up and demonstrated by visible, concrete actions, is virtually meaningless. Faith, *true* faith, on the other hand, is lived out each and every day through the things we do and the words we speak.

So here's the point, says James. If you show partiality; that is, if you show preferential treatment for the rich by taking extra notice of them and giving them places of honor to sit at in the assembly and so forth, all the while failing to take notice of or helping the poor in your midst, then you have committed sin and are therefore "convicted by the law."

Tony Campolo tells a story that he originally heard from a friend who is an associate pastor of a large Presbyterian church out in California. This pastor told Tony that she likes to go to the Nordstrom department store

in Bel Air during the Christmas season. She can't really afford to buy very much at that store, but she at least enjoys going there during the holidays just to take in the ambiance. The Christmas decorations are always magnificent, she told him, and there's live music on several of the floors.

On one of these holiday visits to Nordstrom's, Tony's friend was on the top floor of the store looking at some of the finest dresses in the world, when suddenly the elevator doors opened up and out stepped a bag lady. Her clothes were dirty and her stockings were rolled down to her ankles. She just stood there holding a gym bag in her right hand. It was obvious that this woman was out of place and not about to buy anything. The dresses *started* at a thousand dollars, you see, and this bag lady clearly did not have that kind of money.

In fact, Tony's pastor friend fully expected a security guard to arrive at any moment to escort this bag lady out of the store. But instead of a security guard, a well-dressed saleswoman came over *instead* and asked, "May I help you, madam?"

The bag lady said, "Yeah! I wanna buy a dress." The saleswoman responded, "What kind of dress?" in a polite and dignified manner. In other words, exactly how she would have asked one of her *wealthiest* Bel Air shoppers. "A party dress!" the bag lady answered. "Well, you've come to the right place," said the saleswoman. "Follow me. I think we have some of the finest party dresses in the world."

The saleswoman then spent more than 10 minutes matching dresses with the woman's skin and eye color, trying to help her ascertain which dress would go best with her complexion. Then, after selecting three dresses

that the saleswoman deemed to be the most appropriate, she asked the bag lady to follow her to the dressing rooms.

Tony's friend immediately hurried into an adjoining dressing room and put her ear up to the wall. She wanted to hear all of this. "It was remarkable" she said.

The bag lady then tried on the dresses with the saleswoman's help. But, then, after about ten *more* minutes, the bag lady announced, somewhat abruptly, "I think I've changed my mind."

Now, at this point, one might have expected the saleswoman to have finally lost her patience after taking up the better part of half an hour and trying to serve someone who never had any *intentions*, not to mention the *means*, of actually buying anything in the first place. Instead, the saleswoman said gently, "That's okay. But here's my card. And should you ever come back to Nordstrom's, I do hope that you will ask for me. I would consider it a privilege to wait on you again."

"This, of course," says Tony, "is a brilliant illustration of what Jesus would do if *Jesus* was a saleswoman in Nordstrom's." It's also a brilliant illustration, *I* would add, of the kind of behavior that James would like to see from the church as well.

Amen.