

## FAITH IN ACTION

James 2:1-10, 14-18

September 6, 2009

A wealthy businessman decided to take a walk and eat his lunch at the same time. He strolled through a park and purchased a hot dog and a soft drink. As he walked, enjoying the view, two different street people approached him one by one. Each asked, "Can you help me, I am hungry?" Each time the businessman looked straight ahead and kept walking. After finishing his lunch he began to walk back to his office. He stopped and bought a chocolate éclair for dessert. As he was about to take the first bite, he was forced to jump out of the way as a young boy raced down the sidewalk on his skateboard. The éclair went flying and landed on the ground. The man picked it up and tried to clean it off, but it was no use. It was now a dirty éclair. Before throwing it in the trash, however, he had an idea. He strolled over to one of the beggars who had approached him and handing the man the éclair said, "Here you are my good man. This is something for your hunger." The businessman walked away smiling and returned to his office.

That night the man had a dream. He was sitting in a large and crowded cafe. Waitresses were scurrying about bringing customers delicious cakes and tortes. All the waitresses ignored the businessman, even though he was waving his hands at them continually. Finally he caught the eye of a young woman and asked for something to eat. She returned a few minutes later with a dirty piece of pastry. The man was outraged. "You can't treat me this way. I have a right to be served like all the others. I expect good service and good food for my money." "You don't seem to understand," the waitress responded kindly. "You can't buy anything here. We don't accept money. You have just arrived in heaven and all you can order here is what you sent ahead while on earth. I just checked the records and the only thing we have for you is this dirty éclair."

Wow, think about that. What have you sent ahead? What have you given to those in need? That businessman obviously thought quite highly of himself and he enjoyed the fine things his money could buy, but he could seemingly care less for the needs of others. He had never learned, or at least he failed to put in practice the words of our Lord Jesus – Love your neighbor as yourself.

In the epistle lesson today, James encourages us never to think that we are above or better than others; we are all sisters and brothers, members of the same world family. All people deserve our respect. All people are worthy of our love and time and attention. The Christian virtue of welcoming others and sharing our blessings allows us to welcome Christ. We have no option; this is what we do as people of God.

When you read through the Gospels, you discover that Jesus welcomed all people. No one was ever rejected; all were given a chance. Jesus freely associated with those people whom society shunned. Tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, non Jews. Think of the Gospel lesson today. The woman who approached Jesus to ask for help was not Jewish, not part of God's chosen people, but Greek. When Jesus saw her faith, her persistence, he granted her request, her daughter was healed. Jesus summarized his preferential outreach to those on the fringes of society: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Luke 9:12b-13).

Jesus took the time necessary to welcome the sick and infirmed. Saint Luke reports, "As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them" (Luke 4:40). The second half of the Gospel today records another miracle of Jesus. He healed a man who was deaf and could hardly talk. Jesus had compassion for people. He cared about their physical needs.

The love of Jesus extended to all people. God wants all people to be a part of His kingdom. He wants all people to be saved. The guy on the street corner asking for money because He's hungry. The lady in the grocery store who's beating on her kids again. The person who speeds around you in traffic because you're driving too slow and then gives you a dirty look. The guy who is cutting his grass when you're coming to church on Sunday. God wants all those people to be with Him forever. Jesus died on a cross for all those people.

Sometimes we like to think – I'm better than those people. But are you really better. What does the Bible say. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." All our righteous acts are like filthy rags." We all fall short. We all sin. Therefore we all need Jesus. He's the way the truth and the life. He is our only hope of salvation. He paid for our sins at the cross. He rose again in victory over sin and death. And now by faith in Jesus, believing in Him, trusting in Him, we are children of God, holy and pure and forgiven in Jesus.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost. He went to those who were the outcasts of society, those nobody else wanted to come near. Today our mission is to seek and save the lost. Even those who are not like us; those who don't look like us or act like us or think like us. **DO WE REALLY WELCOME ALL PEOPLE AT COVENANT? WILL WE REACH OUT TO ALL?** Those are the questions the WORD from James brings to us today.

James, in direct and challenging words, takes the message of Jesus and applies it to his audience. Apparently the people James was first writing to had shown partiality and favoritism in the church. He uses an example. The man in fine clothes gets a great seat and the man with tattered clothes gets to sit on the floor. Can we relate to that illustration? I think this happens a lot in the church today. We often make distinctions, creating separations and divisions based merely on what we observe or the previous opinions we have formed. We do this both with people we know and those we know not. We make decisions and classify some people and groups as acceptable while rejecting others. An inclusive, welcoming spirit too often loses out to an exclusivist mentality and approach.

The bottom line is that partiality and favoritism is sinful. That's not how the Savior treated people and it's not how we should treat people. If we truly have faith in Jesus then we need to live that faith and let it show. It shows in the way we treat others – especially the poor, the sick, the hungry. It shows in the way we welcome others and the way we reach out to others. If we take the time to reach out to those in need and help them, it can really make a difference in their lives.

This reality is clearly demonstrated through a little story.

One day a businessman was rushing to a meeting. As he hurried along the sidewalk he passed a homeless man sitting on a bench with a pot of somewhat wilted flowers and a hat ready for donations. Feeling sorry for the man, he reached into his pocket and threw in about a dollar of change, but he took no flower. He continued down the sidewalk but was forced to stop at a traffic light. As he waited he thought, "That man was selling flowers and I did not take my purchase. I must return and take a flower." Although he might be late for his meeting, the man turned about and found the homeless flower salesman. "I apologize, my good man," said the businessman. "Your flowers are fairly priced and you have a good business. Please excuse my earlier lack of concern for your livelihood." The businessman then chose a flower and hurried off to his meeting.

One month later the same businessman was eating lunch with some clients in one of the city's finest restaurants. Unexpectedly one of the waiters came to him and said, "Sir, I am sure you do not remember me, but I will never forget you. One month ago you spoke to me as I sold flowers on the street. You restored my self-dignity and encouraged me to get my life in order. It is because of your faith in me that I have this job today."

When we welcome others and show them respect, we welcome Christ and honor him. Spanish-speaking peoples have an expression that illustrates this point: *Mi casa es tu casa*. Literally translated it means, "My

house is your house," but these words do not adequately convey the significance of this greeting. It is not only an expression of welcome; the words express the reality that for the time guests are entertained in the house, they are members of the family and are treated as such. This is true regardless of who the guests are, their backgrounds, or past histories. All that matters is that they are under the roof of the house and, thus, very special. No one is left on the outside; all are welcomed as if they were Christ. We should not look upon others as strangers, foreigners or create any other categories. All that is necessary is to realize that they are God's children. To honor them is to honor Christ. We can have no greater privilege.

It is sad but true that many times we, as individuals and a society, live life in a manner completely contradictory to the message of Saint James. We separate and discriminate on many levels and various criteria. We separate people on the basis of intelligence, appearance, and personal habits. Only those who are sufficiently bright, beautiful or handsome, and sophisticated are acceptable; others are given the proverbial dirty eclair. We make distinctions based on political and religious views and ideologies. Again, some are acceptable and others are not. We categorize and separate ourselves based on physical and mental condition, ethnic and racial origins, and even cultural views.

Our tendency to be exclusive occurs not only in our relationships with those who are different; it also happens with those who, at least on the surface, are in "our own group." Believe it or not much of our attitude can be explained by observation of how dogs treat each other.

One day a woman observed an interesting occurrence. She began her story: "There was a terrible racket outside my home and I went to the window to see what was happening. I saw a large dog standing outside the front yard fence and my dog was barking wildly at it. Have you ever noticed how the dog on the inside usually barks wildly if another dog passes by outside, yet, the dog on the outside does not bark at all? I guess that is the way it is with dogs."

The woman continued saying, "I knew that the dog outside belonged to a neighbor, so I went outside and opened the gate. Almost instantly the barking stopped. There was some sniffing as they wanted to make sure of each other, but then the two dogs proceeded to ignore each other. I guess that is the way it is with dogs."

She then continued in a reflective mode, "It seems that the way the dogs act is the way church members act as well. The ones outside never bark, but the ones inside often bark angrily at those not on the inside with them. However, after they come inside and we are familiar with them, we come to completely ignore them, unless they happen to be in our social crowd." She thought, "It would be nice if we changed the rules and stopped acting like dogs. Wouldn't it be better if we extended our hands and were friendly to those on the outside? Wouldn't it be so much better if we did not ignore each other, except for the occasional sniff or handshake at church or greeting during a holiday?"

"Just think how many broken hearts would be mended, how many tears dried if we cared enough to notice and to share a bit of genuine love. It's too bad that more love can be generated by a puppy wagging its tail to cheer one up than what we do. But I guess that's the way it is with dogs! What about us?"

James provides us with a significant challenge - to truly love your neighbor, every neighbor, all people, as you love yourself. We are called to live an active faith by seeking to accept all. Moreover, we are told to have a preferential option for the poor and those who need our attention the most - those, in other words, who need a doctor. Let us learn this lesson well. May we give others the best we have and not just a leftover dirty eclair. Amen.