

Sermon: Playing Favorites

Year B, Proper 18

[Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37](#)

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I was on the cross trainer earlier in the week, and I was commenting to the woman next to me that I loved our gym because there was no spandex there. “But you’re wearing spandex!” she replied. And I was. My work out shorts have spandex in them that make it possible for me to work out. I wanted to explain. I meant the people who are in Spandex from head to toe. Except she was and I didn’t mean her. I meant the skinny, fit people who disdain people like me who are not fit and who are over-weight and are frankly scary looking when we finish up working out. And yet how can I really tell what someone is thinking because of what they are wearing.

James says we can’t have favorites. Honestly, *human life* is about favorites. More blue, less orange. More Star Trek, less Star Wars. More home baked, less store bought. If you’re going to be human, you’re going to have favorites. James points out the peril that having favorites brings you into. A well-dressed, jeweled rich person and a poor person in dirty clothes show up at church. If you have favorites, you’ll treat them differently. You’ll treat the rich person better.

Will we do that? Those of us here in this church? I think the honest answer is “no”, we wouldn’t. But the other part of that honest answer, for many of us, is “we would have to watch ourselves to be sure we didn’t.” And if it’s not treating rich people better, isn’t there some class of people, flaming liberals, flaming conservatives, skinny people who wear Spandex that matches their sneakers, there is just someone we want to treat better or worse because of who we think they are from the outside.

And yet James says no favorites. He uses rich and poor to make his point, but think of the point he’s making. No favorites. His story starts with two very different kinds of people coming into a congregation, a rich person and a poor person. Most people aren’t rich and most people don’t think of themselves as poor, so neither of these new arrivals would be perceived as being like someone already in the congregation. So what if someone shows up who is very like the congregation? The same in race, income, age, whatever. Just as it is only too human to prefer people who appear to be like us, the minute we are in the middle of a group of people more or less like us, don’t we start to look for favorites? James says that *the poor have been chosen to be rich in faith and heirs to the kingdom that [God] has promised* (James 2:5). Fair enough. But for those who are not poor, or who do not consider themselves to be poor, don’t we sometimes begin to wonder at how rich their faith is? Because we know we don’t like hypocrites. James isn’t saying, you have to go against your instinct and let the poor be your favorite. James is saying, “no favorites.” Because when you have favorites, your beliefs end up taking your actions into places that go against what God has asked us to do. We don’t get to judge people. That’s God’s job. And yet it’s so, so human to do so.

Make no mistake. When James says “no favorites”, he’s asking us to basically deliver a miracle. And not only deliver one miracle, but deliver miracles multiple times a day every day. He’s asking us to have favorites and set them aside. We can’t just believe we would treat everyone as we would be treated, we have to actually do it. I’m willing to work on treating the poor and the outcasts and everyone else the way I would be treated. But having to treat the beautiful people in the Spandex as I would be treated? I’m perfectly happy not loving them. But that’s what James

is saying. No favorites. We learn stuff about ourselves when we follow Jesus. I have no idea how I'm going to come to terms with my own biases against the Spandex people, but that's part of what following Jesus means. Daily miracles, delivered by people who are less than miraculous.

The story from Mark today tells a miracle story too. There is a woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon. Drugs, alcohol, love of money or fame, too much time on her cellphone, pick your modern day demon that might possess your daughter. If you thought there was someone in the neighborhood who could remove that burden from your beloved child, wouldn't you go seek him out?

The woman gets her miracle. Jesus doesn't even have to lay a hand on the girl. The demon is driven out. But it is the first part of the story that's so fascinating. It's not exactly clear why Jesus is so far afield, so deep into the land of the Gentiles. Maybe he's just taking a break from his ministry. He's in a land where the Jews are suffering under the demands of the Syrophenician land owners who aren't Jews. He's trying to keep a low profile and this gentile woman comes up to him and begs him to heal her daughter.

The treat-others-as-you-would-be-treated Jesus would say "sure", would walk with her to her home and lay hands on the girl and heal the child. Instead Jesus says *Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.* (Mark 7:25). He says, "no." And he doesn't say it nice. He calls the woman a dog. He's going to take care of the children he has been given, the Jews, and no one else. Ouch.

But like most of the mothers I know, she doesn't back down when it's something for her kid. If you're looking for a miracle that a regular human produces every day, the kind James is asking of us, there's one right at the heart of this story. Parents find ways to help their kids that they could not find for anyone else.

And the mom does something more. She sees in Jesus the potential to be so much more than the fulfillment of the promise to the Jews. He can save the entire world. She may be a dog under the table of the chosen ones, but she can live on crumbs and it's the same food. She not only sees his potential, but she makes sure Jesus sees that potential in himself.

It was Jesus who, when asked what the greatest law was, replied "to love your neighbor as yourself." Because of that, James and others refer to it as the royal law, because it rules over all the other laws. And yet, here is Jesus, not treating her as he would be treated.

It's shocking, isn't it? And yet we follow a God whom we freely acknowledge is both fully divine and fully human. We focus again and again on how divine Jesus is, about how he says and does the things that just feel completely beyond us. We are willing to see his humanity when he suffers a horrendous death. We are willing to acknowledge that he was betrayed by other humans as we have been betrayed.

But in this story from Mark, really in this one reply when he is probably tired and overwhelmed and ticked off with all these people surrounding him who demand more and more miracles and who simply don't get what he is trying to show them, we see his humanity. He had a favorite, the Jews, and that belief led him into action that took him away from his own message. He encounters a woman, a gentile, someone who society would never, ever let address him, let alone challenge him. And she gets it. She gets what he's trying to show the whole world. In that moment she might get it better than he does.

That's the miracle in this story. That our God was so human that he had favorites and he let them take him away from what he was meant to be doing. That our God was so human that he had to be called on it. And that someone who wrote down the story of Jesus' life didn't clean up the story. We get to see our fully divine God, capable of casting out demons at a distance, we get to see him in this fully human moment of having favorites. We get to see him changing, showing mercy, offering compassion. We prefer our God to be divine. Today's stories remind us that we have to let go of our favorite version of Jesus and let the reassurance of his humanity anchor our understanding of God's mercy. We can be merciful and compassionate with everyone, even when they are not our favorites, because Jesus was and is and always will be.