

SERMON TITLE: “The Final Apologetic”

TEXT: James 2:1-13

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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INTRODUCTION

We’ve now entered somewhat of a transitional phase as a church, both as far the space we occupy on Sunday mornings, as well as in the themes we will be dealing with in our sermon-series. Once we enter our building we plan on beginning an in-depth exploration of our church’s mission statement.

But we’re not there yet. So, as in every case when I’m not quite sure what to preach on, I turned to the lectionary early this week.

I’ve actually grown to really appreciate this option—and not just because it sounds exotic and sophisticated and very un-Mennonite to say the word “lectionary!” There is something to be said for simply being given a set of texts and having to wrestle with them, trying to figure out what God might want to say to his people through them.

One of the texts for today is James 2:1-13. So I am going to use a passage from James (the NT *book*) to expand upon what James (the *pastor*) introduced us too last week: the church being a place where we embrace each other with all of our strengths and weaknesses and support each other as we work to make Jesus Christ and his kingdom known, both in word and in deed.

Specifically, our passage this morning talks about favouritism and how this has no place in the Christian community.

PUT IN MY PLACE

But before we get to our text—a story.

For those who don’t know, prior to coming to Nanaimo one year ago Naomi and I and the kids lived in Vancouver where I attended Regent College for three years.

One of the things I enjoyed about studying at a world-class theological institution was that we got the opportunity to see and hear some fantastic world-renowned guest speakers. During the three years I was there, some really big names came through the doors—names like Miroslav Volf, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Mark Noll, Walter Brueggeman, and Alister McGrath. Maybe these aren’t household names for most people, but for theology nerds? Pretty cool!

I remember sitting in some of these lectures thinking, “Wow! Is this ever awesome! These are guys whose books I have read—Bible and theology superstars!—standing right there! At the front of the chapel!”

Of course this made *us* feel pretty important as students too! After all, these important people came all this way to speak at *our* school. To *us*. And why? Well, *obviously* because *we* were worth talking to. We were smart and sophisticated and theologically astute. And *humble*. Who wouldn’t want to come and present their ideas to us?

Anyway, as enjoyable and intoxicating as these experiences were, there was something that always kind of rubbed me the wrong way. When we entered the chapel, we would see the front three rows or so marked off for “VIPs.” All of us common folk—students and the general public—would have to arrive 30-40 minutes early in order to get a regular seat, if we were lucky, a spot on the floor or the stairs near the back if we were *less* lucky, or a spot in the room across the hall where the closed-circuit TV feed was broadcasting if we were *unlucky*.

But the VIPs—Regent faculty, prominent members of the community who had donated large sums of money to the college, etc—could arrive 2 minutes before the lecture started and have their seats, which were always right at the front, waiting for them.

What came through loud and clear was that there was a very definite hierarchy—and that people like me were at the bottom of it!

Now, I’m partially joking here. I know that there are certain people who have to be at these lectures, and that they need to have seats. I know when there is limited seating for a popular event, decisions have to be made and some people just draw the short straw. And I know that many of the “VIPs” at these events were and are extremely dedicated Christians whose commitment to the poor and the “least of these” was truly admirable and Christ-like.

But part of me still wondered about the protocol of these lectures and what it communicated. In fact, sometimes this morning’s passage from James even came to mind.

We claimed to be a “Christian community” that embodied a different set of values than the culture we are a part of. Why not allow a stranger who was wandering through the atrium the best seat in the house? Why not have the “reserved seats” at the *back* and make the best seats right at the front available to common students or Joe/Jane Public?

Didn’t the way we structured these lectures communicate that we were no different than anywhere else in society where the best opportunities, the best seats at restaurants, or prestigious theatre events, or hockey games go to the elite members of society? Those with power, prestige, brains, influence, and money? Weren’t we just mimicking those we were supposed to represent an alternative to?

JAMES 2:1-13: TEXT AND CONTEXT

Well, the questions I had about my Regent lectures were not new ones. The situation I've just described is in some ways similar to the one James is dealing with in our passage this morning:

¹ My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ² Suppose someone comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor person in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the one wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the one who is poor, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵ Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Showing favouritism is serious business for James! To judge on the basis of appearances and to show favouritism is sin. Plain and simple. It is to fail to love our neighbours as ourselves.

As you might guess from this passage, James is an interesting book that many tend to shy away from because it seems to emphasize works over grace. Some have claimed that James is a legalistic book that goes against the theology of Paul's letters, which emphasize that it is the free grace of God, not human effort by which we are saved.

Even Martin Luther—the guy who kick-started the Protestant reformation way back in the 1500's—didn't think much of the book of James. He considered James worthless and said it had "nothing of the gospel about it." Compared to other books in the NT, James took a bit of time to be accepted as a part of the canon of Scripture. Right up into the 4th century, it was a disputed book that caused a lot of overheated debate and controversy.

So what is it about James that *has* caused and *continues* to cause such a fuss? Well, to put it bluntly, James is pretty blunt. He is not very tolerant of sin. He doesn't sugarcoat things to make his listeners feel better.

James is relentlessly practical and demands that Christian faith have some observable effect on how we live. His famous mantra is “**faith, by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead**” (James 2:17). Not “sick,” or “in need of improvement,” or “inefficient” or any other less harsh adjective. *Dead*.

James doesn't seem to care much about what those he is writing to claim to “believe.” James knows that words are cheap, that it is easy to profess all kinds of wonderful things about what we believe about God. In James 2:19 he says this:

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

“Congratulations!” he says. By “believing” in God you're in about the same place as the forces that actively *resist* God!

You can see why James hasn't always been a very popular book!

James is more concerned with Christian *behaviour* than with Christian *doctrine*. This instantly makes him different than a lot of people.

Churches are usually quite eager to tell people what they believe. If you go to almost any church website you will find a “What We Believe” page. There's one on our website. An abbreviated form of our confession of faith even appears on the back of your bulletins. And there's nothing wrong with telling people what you believe. It's just that according to James, this isn't enough.

What churches ought to have is a “What We Do” section as well. Because what we do shows others what we believe.

And according to our passage this morning, one of the things James church was *not* doing was treating everyone equally. They were treating rich people better than poor people. There were “acceptable” people who had positions of honour and privilege and there was everyone else. For James, this was unacceptable.

THE NEED FOR NEIGHBOURS

Another story—this time, a confession. When Naomi and I first started thinking about coming here and being a part of Neighbourhood Church I wasn't entirely sold on the *name* of the church.

I was nearing the end of graduate studies and my head swimming with precise doctrinal and denominational distinctives. The names of things *mattered* to me. *I wanted to know*,

when I looked at the sign in front of a church—whether the church was in Vancouver, Nanaimo, or Timbuktu!—what that church believed, where I could place them on the denominational spectrum, what kind of preaching, liturgy, music style, and prayers I could or could not expect.

I liked signs like “Kerrisdale Presbyterian,” or St. John’s Anglican or “Bakerview Mennonite Brethren Church, or any other simply designated representation of the beliefs of a congregation. I like clear definitions and categories. Why not something simple like “Nanaimo Mennonite Brethren Church?”

The name “Neighbourhood Church,” at least initially, was not high on my list of clear and definitive names. “Neighbourhood Church? What on earth does that mean? What *kind* of church is it? A Baptist church? United? Evangelical Free? Christian Reformed? Pentecostal? And what about the “neighbourhood” part? *Which* neighbourhood? Harewood? Jingle Pot? Hammond Bay?

So neither part of the name—the “neighbourhood” or the “church” seemed to meet the precise criteria I would have preferred.

But once we were here, there was an event in the life of the church that began to change the way I thought about our church’s name. Last fall, Walter and Iris King started coming to our church. For those who don’t know this lovely couple, they are both over eighty years old, in fairly fragile health. One Sunday they just pulled up to the church in a taxi out of the blue. They had no previous connection to our church or pretty much any church. They didn’t know anyone. They weren’t really sure what they believed.

When I asked them why they decided to come to our church they said, “Because the sign says ‘Neighbourhood Church’ and we’re a part of the neighbourhood.”

Walter and Iris had *no idea* what denomination our church belonged to when they came. They had no idea what an “Anabaptist” church might be, much less a “Mennonite Brethren” one, they seem to have very little interest in the kind of precise doctrinal details that were of such great concern to me.

They simply needed someone to act like a neighbour to them. They were looking for somewhere to belong, somewhere they were welcome, somewhere where they were noticed and cared for, somewhere where their age and their physical limitations were not barriers to connecting with others. They were looking for community.

(You’ll probably remember that last fall we baptized Walter and Iris. Even though they haven’t been out for a while for a variety of reasons, I still talk to them and they plan on returning to “their church” once we’re back in our building.)

THE ROYAL LAW

There are people like Walter and Iris throughout our neighbourhoods, our city, our country, and our world—people looking for neighbours in the truest sense of the word.

In 2:8, James refers to something called the “Royal Law”:

Love your neighbour as yourself.

There are few themes more prominent in Scripture than this. It echoes down from Leviticus and is repeated by Jesus as the “Greatest Commandment” in each of the four gospels. We hear it from the mouth of Paul in Romans and Galatians where he simply says that the *whole law* is fulfilled in this one commandment.

We are to love our neighbour as ourselves.

In Luke 10:29 the expert in the law asks Jesus the famous question: “Who is my neighbour?” He wanted to know how far his obligations to others went. It’s as if he’s saying, “OK, I know I have to love my neighbour to get eternal life. Well just tell me who counts as a ‘neighbour’ and I’ll make sure to love them and not extend myself any more than I have to.”

In the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus exposes this question as entirely missing the point.

Jesus never answers his question. Have you ever noticed that? He doesn’t tell him who fits into the “neighbour” category that he has to love. Rather, he tells a story of a man in need and various people’s responses to this man’s need.

The question Jesus leaves the expert in the law with is: “Who *acted* like a neighbour?” The expert was looking to find out whom he had to love; Jesus showed him how real neighbours acted. It’s an amazing parable!

I believe that one of our deepest needs as human beings is the need to belong. We need to feel like we fit, like we matter, like our existence makes a difference to those around us. We have a need to be part of a community where we can love and be loved by others that is hard-wired into us. This is true for every person who walks through our doors, every person we come into contact with throughout our weeks.

And one of the greatest gifts we can give the people we come into contact—as individuals and as a church—is the gift of belonging. We live in a fragmented, fast-paced, individualistic culture in which it is not always easy or natural to make time for one another.

But if we are to be a church where people feel like they belong, it will take concrete decisions on our part to give of ourselves to others, to extend a welcome, to help others belong.

Christian community is supposed to look different. It is supposed to be a sign to the world around us that God extends welcome to all, regardless of tribe or tongue. Regardless of wealth or poverty.

James saw this very clearly. He understood that Jesus' kingdom is an upside down kingdom, where the first are last and the last first. It is a place where those who were once outsiders (and this describes all of us!) are welcome in.

It is a place where nobody is a VIP. Or, it is a place where *everybody* is VIP.

The reason James comes down so hard on those showing favouritism in the church is because Christians, *of all people*, should know that God has no favourites. Christians, *of all people*, should celebrate the breaking down of barriers that divide human beings that was accomplished in Jesus' death and resurrection. Christians, *of all people*, should know that mercy triumphs over judgment.

This is one of the things that we celebrate when we take communion, as we did this morning. Christ's table is open to all who accept his free gift. It is not restricted to those who make enough, those who are smart enough, those who are "spiritual" enough, those who are outgoing or confident enough. There are no "enoughs" that have to be met to come to Christ's table.

THE FINAL APOLOGETIC

Perhaps you are wondering about the title of the sermon today. Perhaps you just think that I just like to use fancy words that nobody really uses much or don't relate to everyday life very well.

The word "apologetic" sounds like it has to do with apologizing for something you did wrong. When we feel remorseful about something we are *apologetic*. But the word's origins have to do with making a defense for something or offering justification. The practice of "apologetics" in theology is about defending and commending the truth of Christianity. It often has to do with showing how Christian doctrines make sense.

But as we have seen, James serves as a warning to us about valuing doctrine over behaviour. For James, the truth of what we believe has to be *seen*.

I borrowed the title for this sermon from a quote by Francis Schaeffer:

"Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful—Christian community is the final apologetic." (Francis Schaeffer)

This is an amazing quote, when you stop to think about it. It is one that I think James would wholeheartedly approve of. *Our relationship with each other* is how the world will know *if our message is truthful*.

If we do not love impartially as Christ loved, the world will conclude that our message is untruthful. We will be like the resounding gong Paul refers to in the famous love passage in 1 Cor. 13. Noisy. Irritating. And not much use to anyone.

But the opposite is also true. If we *do* love impartially, the world will see the truth. John 13:34:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

CONCLUSION

In a few weeks we will be back in our church building. We will once again be worshipping in the shadow of a sign that says "Neighbourhood Church."

The question I want us to think about as we begin to transition back into our familiar location is this: "Will we live up to what it says on our sign? Will people find neighbours at Neighbourhood Church?"

Will we *be* neighbours to those in our community? Will we extend a place of belonging to all, regardless of their financial or social status? Their gender? Their ethnicity? Their intellectual abilities? Will we make space for the stranger?

Will Neighbourhood Church be a place where, to borrow the words of James, we "speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom?" Where "mercy triumphs over judgment?"

I believe that Neighbourhood Church already *is* a place where people can and do find the neighbours they need. I have seen it and heard it in the stories of this community—stories like Walter and Iris's. Our family has experienced it firsthand (and I know Colin and Sarah will as well).

But being biblical neighbours is something we can always do better. It is something that we will spend our whole lives as Christians learning and growing into.

It is the final apologetic, the way in which a watching world will decide if what we believe is true.

May God help all of us to be good neighbours. May God help us to be a community that has experienced the mercy that triumphs over judgment and shows it to all around us.