

14th Sunday after Pentecost - 6 September 2009 - Proper 18 B  
Proverbs 22: 1-2; James 2: 1-10 (11-14), 14-17; Mark 7: 24-37  
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During the late 1960's there was a very, proper "Senior Warden" who served in a large, historical downtown parish. Some of you may remember the late sixties. It is an era known for flower children and Woodstock. Dr. Timothy Leary is running around encouraging the younger generation to turn on, tune in and drop out. Into the service walks a long-haired, bell-bottomed, barefoot "flower child." She looks interested and more than a little curious. She wants to know what's going on. This "flower child" with her tie dyed T shirt, love beads and sandals begins looking for a place to sit. Well, on this particular Sunday, the church is packed! The pews are full! She surveys the crowded church. She saunters down the Church's center aisle, smiling politely at the people in the pews as she passes by. People that won't even look at her! People that look the other way!

A lot of people experience society as judgmental. They experience people being judged according to their age, size, race, gender, sexual orientation, physical attractiveness, clothing, and intelligence, just to name a few. It's a fact of life that every one is not equally intelligent. Everyone is not equally good looking. Everyone is not equally quick witted. People size each other up and pass judgment almost without thinking about it," writes the Rev. David M. Hughes, Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church, Winston-Salem, North Carolina in The Journal of Expository Review.

Here is a fact of life that I consider to be truly sad. I am coming to understand that human nature hasn't changed in the almost 2000 years since the Church began. When James writes his letter he is finding that those early Christians are behaving like self appointed judges. On one level, I think that James is mad because these early Christians are forgetting that God welcomes everyone who comes to Him in faith. They are forgetting that God shows no partiality.

There is a tension between rich and poor in the Church. Favoritism is being shown to the wealthy people. They are pushing the poor marginalized away. James tells them that showing preferential treatment based on wealth and power dishonors everyone. Such action is contrary to God's will and undermines the Church's ability to be community.

James reminds these early Christians that there is a higher standard, God's standard. James reminds people today that there is a higher standard. That standard is often called "The Royal Law." It is often called the "Law of Love." It is what Jesus sets forth in the Gospels: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Because you love God with all your heart this enables you to love others. James' point is that this higher standard calls people to actions of a higher nature. James' point is that they go hand in hand stemming from each other. Truly good works express people's faithfulness.

Back at the Church, the "flower child" walks toward the front of the church, still looking for a place to sit down. One of the near by ushers notices this visitor very quickly. She is out of place. Before the usher can get to her, she sits down crossed-legged on the floor. She sits right in front of the Rector and the pulpit just as the Rector is delivering the day's sermon. The dignified, "Senior Warden" who is serving as "Vestry Host of the Day" springs into action, striding to the front of the church. The entire congregation tenses in anticipation of the ensuing confrontation between this flawlessly dressed pillar of the church and the "flower child."

James' letter spends a lot of time on faith and faithfulness. James uses the word faith a lot. But neither word is used in today's Gospel reading from Mark's gospel.

Today a woman comes to Jesus. Something about her tells everyone immediately that this woman is different. In Jesus' day men and women do not carry on casual conversations. This woman is a Gentile! Jews and Gentiles don't mix. Jesus is a carpenter by trade. She is more than likely an upper class city dweller from the region of Tyre and Sidon. There is certainly no love lost between the Jews and these city dwellers. They encroach upon Jewish borders. They buy up all of the farmer's grain. Keep it for themselves, leaving them little if anything to fall back on in times of drought or famine.

Such differences and disparity in culture and class certainly don't escape Jesus' attention. Just like everyone else. It is amazing that with such differences this woman actually come to Jesus. When this upper class, Gentile woman comes to a Jewish Galilean itinerant Rabbi, two very different worlds collide. But this woman indeed does come seeking Jesus.

Jesus is trying to come into the country quietly, without being noticed, to rest and refresh Himself. But His presence does not go unnoticed. This nameless woman probably hears about Jesus from the crowds following Him. She comes seeking Jesus on behalf of her daughter. She bows down at Jesus' feet giving honor to Jesus, a Jew. "Jesus, I know of the miracles you do. You heal the blind, deaf, sick, and lame. You cast out demons. I am begging you please, please help my daughter. She is in the grip of a demon. I understand that Gentiles are considered unclean, no better than dogs. But my daughter needs healing. Please, Jesus even the dog eats the scraps that fall from their owner's table."

As this woman begs for her daughter's healing, the one she loves. She foreshadows Jesus' teaching about the greatness of being last. She is serving. She is bringing life. I wonder if Jesus knows at this moment that she is doing what he will soon do.

This woman needs to believe that there is something holy and special about Jesus. She needs to believe that God's mercy shows no favoritism. She needs to believe that God's mercy knows no bounds. Her need and her willingness to believe allow her to move toward Jesus. Literally and spiritually. Her faith in God calls her to keep moving toward Jesus even while Jesus turns away.

Seems to be the mission Jesus embraces is marked by ethnic, cultural and economic boundaries. It seems that these barriers between this woman and Jesus will succeed.

Does Jesus really believe that the Kingdom of God is for the Jews? It certainly looks that way. That's all the woman has to go. She challenges Jesus. Jesus changes His mind! Jesus has a change of heart! Because of what she does, her words, her actions show that God's love includes everybody.

In this woman's world God's Kingdom is yet to be fully realized. God's Kingdom has yet to include the "other" those who have not crossed the boundaries erected by race, beliefs, gender, sexual orientation, political and economic differences to create a new inclusive community.

Like this woman you and I live in an imperfect world. We live in a world where prejudice exists in our society. It exists in the Church. There are people today who are denied basic human rights, the barest necessities of life: enough food, decent clothing, safe housing, and adequate medical care. They are denied this because of their age, the color of their skin or their sexual orientation. There are people who have been denied their place in the Church for some of the same reasons. They are being denied access. They are unable to full participation in the life of the Church and the living out of God's call upon their lives.

Fighting exclusion and prejudice in this world is hard work. With God's help it can be done! Step by step you and I can fight it one day and one person at a time. We can fight it! Our call and God's spirit working in us, they help us. God' faith in us and our faith in God empower us to be the community that shows no partiality.

The folks sitting in the congregation are confident that this "flower child will be shown the back door in a hurry. Imagine their surprise when the dignified "Senior Warden" comes along side this "flower child", this "hippie", this "child of God" and sits down, in his Sunday best. Right beside her for the rest of the service. The Rector of the church smiles. Because he realizes that day that Jesus, and Jesus alone, has the best seat in that house.

Who do we exclude? Yesterday, last week who did I exclude? Who will you exclude? Today, tomorrow the next day, who will we include? So writes Rev. David Hughes, "In Christ's Church, everybody, regardless of where he sleeps or how she or he dresses, is somebody. Nobody is better than anybody else in the Body of Christ. Favoritism is forbidden, partiality is forbidden. Checking out another person, and then forming an opinion based solely upon what you see is forbidden. In God's eyes the poor, the vulnerable the marginalized are our neighbors, our brother's and sisters. They possess infinite value! "In God's eyes, everybody is somebody!"  
*Amen*

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