

WGUMC September 9, 2012
James 2:1-9;12-13

"Many-Splendored Love"

The Letter of James has some harsh words of warning, and I get the same feeling reading it that I often do reading the letters of Paul. I get the feeling that the early Christians were a bunch of adolescents. Think about it. Having new-found freedom in Christ, they were only too happy to use it, and couldn't help abusing it. So, maybe if we connect with our inner-adolescent today, we can better hear what James has to say.

Have you ever spent time listening to teenagers talk? I was taking a carload of confirmation kids from the church in Novato to downtown San Rafael on a Friday night a few weeks before Christmas. We were going to interview people on the street and ask them "What does Christmas mean to you?"

The likelihood that we would run into people who were homeless had one tenth-grade boy nervous. Like a lot of privileged kids, he was raised pretty sheltered from the world.

And like most of his peers, he wouldn't admit that he was scared. So, he did what a lot of teenagers do. He started trash talking poor people. There I was, trying to concentrate on driving but couldn't help hearing him make the crudest, stupidest remarks about how people who have no homes look and smell. My attempts to redirect him only seemed to encourage him. I was tempted to quote James: "For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy." But I refrained. Instead, I was embarrassed for him, and so was everyone else in the car.

Then I got to thinking, why do teenagers do that? Where did they learn that? Where does all that judgment come from? And what can we do about it? We live in a world where most of us, not just teenagers, pass judgments on people all the time. We all make distinctions; we all take sides. Everywhere we look, there are these big divides: between men and women; the young and the old; the rich and the poor; black and white, gay

and straight, native and immigrant, Republican and Democrat.

It's exhausting!

Our two political parties have just had their conventions, which are fundamentally televised exercises in taking sides and showing partiality and passing judgment. It's a long American tradition to judge people by where they come from, what they look like, how they think, how they vote. Except in election years, we usually try not to be too obvious about it. The confirmation kid in my car was no different than the rest of us. He was just young enough and reckless enough to be honest about it.

If indeed everyone does it, what can we do about it? That same problem perplexed the author of James. A few things about this letter: First, it isn't really a letter. Second, we don't know who wrote it. Third, we don't know when or where it was written or for whom. All we can know is that someone speaking in the name of James is talking to a group of Jesus' followers.

According to the Book of Acts, the early followers of Jesus were supposed to hold everything in common. That way there would be no distinctions among them. But something wasn't working in James' community. Most of the members of his church were poor. But even they gave special treatment to the rich. After all, by showing favor to the rich, one just might get a few favors. But treating the rich better than the very poor was causing real divisions in the body. It was threatening to breakup the community.

So James warned them, "Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?" And then he showed them a better way. Instead of treating the rich like royalty, he wanted them to practice what he called the "royal law." "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," and Lord knows that takes practice.

Despite all of our differences, everyone must be treated equally because God loves everyone equally. O, it may not

appear that way. The wealthy are rich in money, but James reminds us that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. So, if you think about it, the rich and poor need each other. The rich need the poor because they need something better to do with their money than spend it on themselves. And the poor need the rich, because they need someone with whom to share their faith. So, we're all in this together.

But if James found it hard to get rich and poor coming together, loving each other, worshiping and working together in the 1st century, we are finding it almost impossible in the 21st century. Can the royal law really bridge the ever-growing gap between the 1% and the 99%? I don't know if the law can, but I know that the Lord can, because his mercy triumphs over our judgment.

Let me tell you this: God's love isn't divvied out. You can't slice it up and put it on a pie chart. The 1% and the 99% are equally in need of salvation, and 100% of us are welcome

at the table of grace. Just make sure the communion table is round, so no one can sit at the head of it. Show no partiality; make no distinctions. At round tables, all seats have equal honor.

What a concept. What if we in the church lived as though all of our tables were round? What if the church actually looked like what we wanted the world to look like? Instead of getting our values from the world, what if we gave our values to the world?

When I was a pastor in Novato, we had two worship services. The early service was very small, about 15 people. One Sunday morning, I was standing in front, eyes closed, saying the communion prayer, when I heard a noise behind me. Apparently, a man had come in the church, found his way through the offices, and used a side door to get into the chancel area behind me. When I turned around, I discovered the man was Indian and he was acting quite agitated. He was

saying that he was a Hindu and asking me if he could worship with us. He was saying something about Jesus. So I said what I always say at communion. The table is open to everyone who wants the love God-in-Christ wants to give them. So I invited the congregation to come up and we took his hands and formed a circle and we prayed.

The answer to our prayers came when our head usher at the second service arrived early. Lionel, bless his heart, was born and raised in India and could speak to our guest in his native language. The man was drunk or high or off his meds and he needed help getting home.

I was thinking afterwards, some days we just pretend church. Some days we practice it. But that day we did it. And we can do it here. Do you know my friend, Ed? He's been here several times. He usually slips in late, sometimes sits in the balcony. Waits until worship is over. Have you ever spoken to

him? Ed has his problems, but so do we. Could he be welcome in our family? Would there be a seat for him around our table?

Or do we reserve the love of God to our favorites, the people we know and love, the people who are always a joy to be around? I have some dark chocolate here. Today, it's going to represent the love of God. You've got to figure that any sermon entitled "Many-Splendored Love" is going to involve chocolate! Now I'm going to give this chocolate to a few of my favorite people. What do you think, kids, is this fair? Is this what Jesus would do? Of course not. If this is God's love, then it's for everyone, even Ed. Especially Ed. So, everyone take a chocolate. It's for you. But it's also for someone you know, someone who needs but doesn't yet have the love of God in their life. You can save your chocolate and give it to them.

When they put it in their mouth tell them about the many-splendored love of God that works in many wonderful ways. Tell them that it's a melt-in-your-mouth, seep-into-your-

soul kind of love. They can have as much as they want and they won't gain any weight. The only thing they'll gain is grace.

Eat it up!