

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 18, 2022

James 2:1-13

“Let’s Keep Our Palms Up and Our Noses Down”

My brothers, have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ without showing favoritism. For example, suppose a man enters your worship assembly wearing gold rings and fine clothing, and a poor man also enters wearing filthy clothing. If you look with favor on the man wearing fine clothing and say, “Sit here in this good place,” but you tell the poor man, “Stand over here” or “Sit down here at my feet,” have you not made a distinction among yourselves and become judges with evil opinions? Listen, my dear brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom, which he promised to those who love him? But you dishonored the poor man. Don’t the rich oppress you, and don’t they drag you into court? Aren’t they the ones who blaspheme the noble name that was pronounced over you? However, if you really fulfill the royal law of Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, since you are convicted by this law as transgressors.

In fact, whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one point has become guilty of breaking all of it. For the one who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law of freedom. For there will be judgment without mercy on the one who has not shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

It's possible you've already heard this story in a sermon not long ago, but it's one of my favorites from the life of Martin Luther, and it fits today's theme wonderfully: In 1546, in the middle of a bitter winter night, Martin Luther lay on his deathbed. He was sixty-two years old. But back then, living to sixty-two was like living to ninety-two these days. And he'd had a stressful life. So that night, his heart gave out. After he died, his doctor went through the pockets of his overcoat, to look for valuables or messages that Luther may have left for his family. There was nothing valuable in Luther's pockets, and no message for his wife or children. Likely there was nothing valuable because he liked to give all his money away, unless his wife Katherine hid it from him to stop him from giving it away. And likely there were no personal notes for his family because he wrote them letters so often expressing his love for them.

But there was one very small, tattered piece of paper with two short sentences on it. As Luther's doctor held that tattered piece of paper in his hands, he read Luther's last message to the world. The little paper said: “This is true. We are all beggars.” Or maybe it wasn't a message to the world. Maybe it was more to himself, a reminder he would receive every time he reached into his pocket for anything, and touched that little crumpled paper.

We are all beggars. This is not a flattering way to think of ourselves. But as Luther simply wrote: “This is true.” No matter who you are, no matter what you do, no matter what you have. Before God, we are all beggars. We deserve nothing good from him. Much human dissatisfaction comes from the mistaken idea that God owes us good things, and we have a right to feel cheated when he takes them away for withholds them. We have nothing coming from him in the first place. In fact, all we deserve from him is the scorn and punishment that our sins deserve.

But to us beggars God gives everything good. To us beggars God gives gifts beyond what we can comprehend. He fills our dirty, empty hands with the forgiveness of sins in his Son. And then he keeps piling the richest spiritual blessings into our hands: life forever in paradise, the privilege of prayer, his Word and his Supper to strengthen our saving faith.

On top of all that, he piles on worldly blessings, as much as he sees fit. Homes and families and cars and computers, fridges so full that sometimes we can barely get them to close, and struggle to get our food eaten before it expires. He gives us a wonderful country and city to live in. (Our nation and its cities have plenty of problems, no doubt. But getting to live in this part of this country at this time is way better than 99% of human beings in history have had it. We focus on problems, but the blessings of living where do are tremendous.)

This is true. We are all beggars. Beggars with hands that were empty, hands that deserved nothing, hands that God has filled with blessings, spiritual and physical.

In many Christian churches, the congregation is reminded of this every time their clergy prays. He stands at the altar, extends his arms, and holds his palms up. By his actions the priest or pastor says, "God, we are all beggars here. But we know how good you are, and we expect you to give us good things, because you are kind and generous. Please fill these empty hands with blessings."

Many years ago, I was walking through the bar district in downtown Milwaukee with some friends. A man approached. He was panhandling. But the way he spoke and acted was almost hostile. He said, "Hey, gimme a dollar." I thought that was a strange way for him to act and speak. You don't expect cockiness from someone asking for things, do you? As long as he has his palms up, you expect him to have his nose down. That's what smart beggars do. They keep their palms up and they act humble. Needy.

Not so long ago I sat in the left turn lane at Smoketown and Prince William Parkway. A lady was holding a sign that simply said, "Please help me." I don't know, but I bet she was getting quite a bit more than the pushy man in Milwaukee.

We are all beggars. We have no right to be anything but humble, because everyone of us – no matter who you are – every single one of us is totally dependent on God for everything, from salvation to saltine crackers. We have our palms up for everything, whether we always remember that fact or not. As long as we have our palms up to God, we cannot have our noses in the air.

And yet, we sometimes do it, don't we? In these verses St. James writes at length about one way we Christians beggars stick our noses up. He writes about discriminating against the poor and lowly and showing favoritism to the wealthy. That's one thing that can happen when we forget that we are *all* beggars. We begin to think that some people are more important and more worthy than others. And we begin to show favoritism. It may be toward wealth; or it could be toward intelligence, good looks, athleticism, or social standing.

We forget that all human beings are the same in God's eyes – just beggars. And just because God has filled some hands with more wealth or beauty or intellect does not change the fact that all people – rich or poor, smart or not-so-smart, attractive or ugly, funny or serious, light or dark

skinned – are spiritually doomed by nature, and only saved by the gracious hand of God. Forgetting that fact can lead us to stick our noses up at people we think are less valuable or less worthy. God does not think they are less valuable. He thinks they're beggars, just like you. He fills their hands from pure grace, just like yours.

James puts this sin of favoritism into a social context when he talks about how we treat other people in our day-to-day lives, showing preferential treatment to the wealthy. But we can also show this sin of favoritism in the way we treat people spiritually. He writes: **So speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law of freedom. For there will be judgment without mercy on the one who has not shown mercy.** God will judge us beggars by (literally) “the law that gives freedom.” On the Last Day, we sinners will have our palms up depending on the unbreakable promises of God's Word. We will come with nothing of our own in our hands to save ourselves – only the cross of Christ and its gracious forgiveness, given to us by faith.

You would expect beggars, who receive forgiveness freely from God, to forgive each other the very same way, without regard to who the person is. But do we always do that? Or are we more ready to forgive friends than enemies? To show mercy to someone who will be able to pay us back with a favor? To pardon someone important? When we do, we forget that our own palms are up to God for forgiveness. So we have no right sticking our noses up to anyone who needs forgiveness from us. Consider James' final warning: **For there will be judgment without mercy on the one who has not shown mercy.** If you keep your nose up when it comes to forgiving your fellow beggars, your own palms will drop, until you drop God's forgiveness for yourself. You can't have your palms up and your nose up at the same time.

You know, Jesus has a lot of experience with arrogant people who played favorites in every possible way. Some were called Pharisees, and these guys had no clue that they were beggars before God. They were proud to play favorites and withhold forgiveness from people who they thought were unworthy. They wore it as a badge of honor. Which is why they were so confused and put off by this teacher named Jesus who ate with poor people and social outcasts, people the Pharisees called “sinners” (as if the Pharisees weren't). Often when Jesus ate with and talked to social outcasts like tax collectors, the Pharisees were there with their noses in the air. But Jesus refused to play favorites. Not in his day-to-day interactions. And not with his forgiveness.

Let me take you on a brief tour of chapters two through four in the Gospel of John. In chapter two, Jesus attends a wedding in a tiny town. He doesn't turn his nose up at the people there. He comes as an invited guest to their wedding, and then helps them when they run out of wine. In chapter three he speaks to a curious man named Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus in the middle of the night. And patiently, carefully, Jesus explains to him the mysteries of God – even though Nicodemus is one of those dreaded Pharisees. Nicodemus is ready to learn. And Jesus teaches him, without labeling him unworthy because of where Nicodemus is coming from. In chapter four Jesus sits at a well with an adulterous woman from Samaria. Jews like Jesus are supposed to hate Samaritans because of their race. And this woman is a notorious sinner besides! But there Jesus sits, talking to her, showing her the way of salvation. He takes the time to confront her sin so that she will see her error and find forgiveness in him.

Throughout his life, Jesus shows no favoritism for any reason. He is always ready to deal with anyone – anyone! – and to forgive everyone – everyone! – who turns to him in repentance. And

he did this as more than just an example for us. He did it in our place. For the times we've forgotten that we are all beggars, and treated some better, some worse, forgiven some, but not others. He forgives us by his holy, favoritism-free life, and his death on the cross. Even in death, Jesus shows no favoritism. His death atones for every sin of every human being. Because we are all beggars, Jesus did it for all of us, for every sin.

His life and death fills the hands of us beggars with forgiveness and eternal life. So keep your palms up. God has filled them, and he will keep filling them, with every good gift – the spiritual gifts, won by Christ – and the physical ones on top of those, as much as he sees fit. Remember what's in your own begging hands – hands that held nothing but now hold everything purely by God's grace. And your nose can only stay in one place: straight down.

Each one of us will be humble, seeing each other as deserving the same respect and the same forgiveness. Because in the end we are all beggars, with palms up and filled by God. Amen.