

Integrity of Faith

Ps: 125

Epistle: James 2:1-10 (11-13), 14-17

Gospel: Mark 7:24-37

Lesson: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23 (Courtesy Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

22:1 A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.

22:2 The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.

22:8 Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail.

22:9 Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

22:22 Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate;

22:23 for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

It's my Birthday. I'm 51 years old. And I don't seem to know any other way of responding to this scripture without getting rather personal and hopefully not too political. I truly do believe that sermons should be a-political. I'm sure my political leanings are evident still, but I try not to be too obvious. I share my point of view on the scriptures and hope that everyone can relate, regardless of the political leanings, because to me **the most important aspect of faith is: loving and sharing God in community** and politics can bring about tremendous polarization.

For example, I was told recently about a Town Hall fight where 2 people actually not only broke into fist fights, but one bit off the pinky finger of the other. And this discussion as to whether or not our President will be allowed to speak to school children has led to even more polarization. It seems like every time I turn around someone is getting all up in arms about someone else's opinions and taking it to extremes that would never have been apparent 20 years ago.

The ugliness seems to be escalating more and more as the years go on. I fear that our country will end up like the movie "Idiocracy". I heard about the movie on NPR and so I watched it. I hated it. It was a stupid sophomoric film in my opinion. The populace in the 26th century was so dumbed down that a mediocre man from the 21st century was the most brilliant man in the world. Violence and sex were the major pastimes of the people and profanity peppered every sentence. I hated the film, especially because it wouldn't leave me. The commercials during the film only reinforced and seemed to warn the viewers that this film seemed to be exactly the direction this country is taking.

These scriptures from today show me an ideal of the world which apparently contradicts where this world wants to go. Imagine - a vast majority of the populace caring more about their name being associated with a God who loves the poor, than making big bucks and being famous! According to our scriptures from today God loves those wealthy ones who share with the poor and show their faith by being generous with the poor. In James we read that God has *chosen* the poor to be rich in faith and be *heirs of the kingdom*.

The first sentence of our lesson for today is, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold." 'A good name': meaning our name represents a person who has faith-integrity. Not just someone who talks about their faith but you can see their deeds in their lives consistently. Faith isn't just a cloak someone puts on and off when it is convenient - it is symbolic of where the individual is in their relationship with God. Faith integrity depicts that person to their core.

In Bible Study we are discussing "The Ten Commandments" by Joan Chittister, and we just talked about the second chapter - the second commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." The Name, representing - the soul - the being - of God, is like that of the name of the one you hold dearest to your heart. When someone makes references to someone you hold dear to your heart, and you know they aren't true, it can be very upsetting, because your soul is intimately intertwined with that other. Our personal integrity is dependent on this relationship with God being unbroken. And since God is also intertwined with the less fortunate, we are as well. Instead of "there but for the grace of God go I . . .", it is ". . . here we all go together in the grace of God."

Our scriptures for today mention over and over how to deal with the poor and basically they are all saying **good people help supply the needs of the poor and don't show partiality**. But where would the movies, magazines and

televisions be without our adoration of the rich and famous? And the lotteries depend on our desire for instant wealth for their success. It would be interesting to see how many jobs and lives depend on the human desire for wealth and adoration of the famous, let alone human vanity!

How we treat the poor is a theme throughout all sections of not only our faith but other religions as well. It seems there will be poor always, throughout all of history and culture. Some countries have fewer poor than others, but one gets the impression that there will always be a group of people who have less than others. Even Russia during the most strident of communistic times had people who were jokingly referred to as being "more equal than others."

So even in most ancient times it was apparent to some how easily it became for some people of comfort to overlook the poverty stricken. In our text is, "Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate . . ." The poor and suffering would gather at the gate to beg, and or they were placed there to get them out of the town. There is a variety of reason why the sick and the needy were there, but there they were. Some people would abuse them, take from them, and run them over if they got in the way.

It is easy to see the poor and suffering of those people as being separate from us, we want to distance ourselves from their pain. Besides, if everyone we know sees the poor as being separate from us, then how can we be wrong? Yet, this is easily seen by people of *faith* as being ungodly. Inhuman as well, actually, yet it is such a dominant human tendency, that contributing mercy to God is more easily understood, because everyone knows we are in need of mercy from God. It just isn't so easy to see that we need to be the ones showing mercy to the poor in a like fashion.

All my life I have heard contradictory opinions about the poor and about what it means to be an American, and when I was confused as to who I should believe, I decided to side with the ones who were the most compassionate for the poor; those who were ready to sacrifice some of their wealth for justice and mercy for the poor.

So in this vein, I am moved to say, every day that goes by without Health Care reform is a day where the poor are being trampled at the gate. There, I said it. Please nobody bite my finger off.

So, where is the good news? In our gospel for today a beggar-woman pleads her case to Jesus for her daughter, in front of witnesses. She shared her belief that even the smallest crumbs of Jesus' compassion would be enough to free her daughter, and he proved her right. Even what Jesus did in *private* caused waves of hope and joy and faith!

There is the good news for us. For in comparison to the troubles out there in the world, all we have is crumbs of faith. But those crumbs have a power. We cannot give up hope for justice for the poor and righteousness - mercy triumphs over judgment.

I do believe that even the few of us here, if we keep listening to the voice of our beloved Jesus, and we keep true to his name - the integrity of our faith can cause unknown and unseen ripple effects. We may not be able to change the world overnight, but we cannot give up, because the community of lovers of God cannot stop hearing God's call to serve the poor and act on our faith. As in our psalm, "the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, so that the righteous might not stretch out their hands to do wrong."

That is what being 'people of faith' is all about. We do our best to be people of integrity, and in time - justice *is* done, souls are united, love is shared, life is good, and God is worshiped. We cannot let the abuses in this world go by without contributing compassion.

We cannot let the apparent enormity of injustice and anger out there deter us from being compassionate and merciful. We have to believe that in the crumbs of our faith in Jesus there is an *eternal* hope that what we do makes a difference - as in our beloved little Starfish tale, which I'm sure we all know, "It makes a difference to that one . . ." And it makes a difference to us all when we do one small step in faith.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen