

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 18
Year B

Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalm 146
James 2:1-17
Mark 7:24-37

I have a confession to make. I show deference to some - whether it is someone I feel is more important than myself, or someone who I perceive is wealthier than me - I show deference. According to our reading from James, that is a sin. I'm sure we can all look at people we show partiality towards. Conversely, we might shy away from someone who might look different from us, or who we might perceive as being dangerous, even when they have shown no sign of hostility. These are cases we might want to examine for ourselves.

Some of you might remember when I first came to you with Fr. Tim. Back then my hair was long and my beard was not well trimmed. During that period, Tim asked me to visit the other churches in EChO. When I went down to Kimberling City, no one there knew me except Mtr. Anne. After the service, we were chatting and she mentioned that it would have been fun for me to wear dirty clothes and look like a homeless person to see how that congregation would have reacted. Unfortunately, we did not think of that ahead of time, so it didn't happen. But, how would we react if someone visited us who looked like they had just come off the street and not had a shower for a while? That is exactly what James is warning his readers about.

Most of the time, we engage in such activity without thought. It is a reflex reaction, perhaps as an unconscious survival strategy. And, while we may not have anyone visit our services who looks unkempt, we do run across such people at the store, on the street, or even on Wednesday evening. How do we interact with them? Do we avoid them? Do we try to look the other way?

James reminds us that Jesus blessed the poor stating they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven. We fail as Christians if we look the other way. God may be sending them to test our reactions. How do we respond? James warns that "judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy." He reminds us that how we engage with people is what is important. "Faith without works is dead." We need to be ready to help those who seek our assistance. Telling someone to go in peace while they are hungry does them no good. But, to offer them a meal, or a coat in the winter, is a sure sign that God is with us.

Do we offer the best seats to the rich and a seat on the floor to the poor? Maybe not literally, but we do show deference to those we perceive as better than ourselves while ignoring the plight of the poor and needy. We do show partiality. In the reading last week from this same letter, we read what true religion is - "to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Let us heed the warnings of James and not allow favoritism to keep us from doing the will of God.