

16th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

James 2:1-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, 'You shall not commit adultery', also said, 'You shall not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Each of us has been given one body to live this life. Some of our bodies are tall; others are short. Some have skin as dark as night and others as white as ivory. Some are rounder than others, broader than others, hairier than others. Some bodies work one way and others work in different ways. Some of us have been in our bodies for a long time and have watched our bodies change throughout the decades. Others of us are rather new to our bodies and are still discovering what it means to live in them. Bodies come in such beautiful variety; they truly reflect the diversity of the world that God so lovingly has created and is still creating.

In fact, take a moment to appreciate your body, right now. Look at your hands; think about all the work they've done. Wiggle your toes, look at your feet; think about all the places they've taken you. Feel your ears; think about all the things they've heard. Feel your nose; think about things they've smelled. Stick out your tongue; think about all the delicious things it's tasted through the years.

Our bodies are gifts given to us by God. Psalm 139 gives voice to this truth when it says to God, "I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Our bodies are the vehicles in which we go about this world doing the faithful gospel work that God is calling us to do.

Our bodies have such potential within them. They can hug or punch. They can run about or sit around and do nothing. They can pull up someone who has fallen down or pull the trigger of a gun. They can climb mountains and go to space. They can do the most amazing things. But it all comes down to this: what we choose to do with our body and how we treat other bodies.

Bodies matter; the biblical narrative makes this completely clear.

For if bodies don't matter, then God wouldn't have saved the Israelites from their Egyptian slavery.

If bodies don't matter, then the Old Testament wouldn't have the plethora of laws dictating how we care for them.

If bodies don't matter, then why on earth would God go to the trouble to come to us in the flesh?

If bodies don't matter, then why would Jesus bother to feed people, clothe people, heal people?

In fact, one could say that one of the most important, well, *embodiments* of the Gospel is how we treat one another's bodies.

Last week's sermon illustration proves this point. If you were unable to be with us last week, we talked about my grandparent's realtor who uses her free time to minister to the women in Huntington, WV who walk the streets to sell their bodies to fund their heroin addiction. One day a week, she drives around Huntington and hands out brown paper bags to the women that contain food, water, and clothes to stay warm, along with a phone number to call if they want to get clean and get off the streets. If bodies didn't matter to her, then she need do nothing more than pray for them and then go about her life.

But bodies do matter. And not just the bodies that look and act like ours.

Today's passage from the Book of James is about how we treat different kinds of bodies with partiality. Hear again these words from today's passage: "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?"

Friends, the Church has a long history of treating bodies differently depending on how they look or act. Apparently, this was a problem in the early church or else today's passage would never have been written. Apparently the community to which this letter was written was making distinctions between bodies that were dressed differently. The person who came in wearing the latest fashion, the best jewelry, and the perfectly feathered hair got the best seat in the house and received a warm and hearty welcome. However, the person who came in off the street, wearing ragged clothes, and smelling like someone who hadn't taken a bath in a month is told to "stand over there." James suggests that such distinctions are antithetical to the Gospel we are called to embody, a gospel of good news that shares the love of Jesus with every body, no matter its condition or appearance.

You see, when we do not respect other bodies, when we make these distinctions, horrible things can happen. Just last week while watching the funeral for Aretha Franklin, millions of people watched in horror

when a pastor by the name of Charles H. Ellis groped singer Ariana Grande's breast as he was hugging her *from behind the pulpit*. Then, as he continued to hold her in place, he made a racist comment about her name. Friends, this is what happens when bodies are not respected. It is this kind of disrespect of bodies that has brought forth the #metoo movement in the wake of such blatant mistreatment of women's bodies behind closed doors and, even on TV on a internationally televised funeral by a pastor, no less.

So, as a male pastor, hear me when I say: I will do my best to assure that Beaumont Presbyterian Church is a place where all women and girls feel safe and free from harassment and I invite each of you to join me in that commitment. In fact, Beaumont Presbyterian Church should be a place where ALL bodies are respected and treated with dignity and grace, no matter their color, gender, sexuality, or condition.

As it turns out, the topic we discussed this morning in our adult Sunday school class fits nicely with this commitment. We've been going through the new confession "Reclaiming Jesus" and today's portion of the confession is entitled "We are One Body." It reads as such:

"WE BELIEVE we are one body. In Christ, there is to be no oppression based on race, gender, identity, or class. The body of Christ, where those great human divisions are to be overcome, is meant to be an example for the rest of society. When we fail to overcome these oppressive obstacles, and even perpetuate them, we have failed in our vocation to the world - to proclaim and live the reconciling gospel of Christ."

"THEREFORE, WE REJECT misogyny, the mistreatment, violent abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of women that has been further revealed in our culture and politics, including our churches, and the oppression of any other child of God. We lament when such practices seem publicly ignored, and thus privately condoned, by those in high positions of leadership. We stand for the respect, protection, and affirmation of women in our families, communities, workplaces, politics, and churches. We support the courageous truth-telling voices of women, who have helped the nation recognize these abuses. We confess sexism as a sin, requiring our repentance and resistance."

Friends, James calls us to put our faith into practice by making sure that we don't make distinctions among one another. We are called to embody a living faith that treats bodies with respect and dignity.

When the female body is disrespected and harassed, a living faith is called for.

When the black body is called unpatriotic and offensive for peacefully protesting racism and police brutality, a living faith is called for.

When the brown body is called a rapist, or drug dealer, or criminal, a living faith is called for.

When the differently abled body is called "less than" and our facilities do not have access to people in wheelchairs, a living faith is called for.

James closes today's passage with the following words: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Friends, that last statement is the most famous statement in all of the Book of James. It's also one of the most controversial statements in the Bible. And it also happens to be a statement that I think we need so desperately right now. We need James' statement because we need to be reminded that while a spineless faith, a faith without works, may not seem deadly to us, I guarantee you it might very well be deadly for someone else.

But when we do come together and make our faith a living one, when we respect each others bodies and treat one another with dignity, then really beautiful things can and will happen. When we cease to make distinctions among one another because of what our bodies look and act like, you might just been surprised to find the image of God in a fellow human being, an image that you had no idea was there in the first place. You might just discover something new about God and, by consequence, yourself. Who knows what might be unlocked if we heed James' advice?

So, together, let us care for one another's bodies. Let us sit in wonder and awe of the gifts of our bodies and let us respect the bodies of others. For such is the physicality of the Gospel.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.