

Seating Charts & Purity Codes

Proper 18B: James 2.1-17

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Lately I've been trying to increase my tolerance for contamination. Ardelle might tell you this isn't the area of self-improvement I should go to work on first, pointing out my regular failure to wipe my shoes on the mat and the pile of dishes I've left, yet again, in the sink. I'm pretty good at contaminating things around our house.

And, yes, I do realize I'm embracing contamination as a pandemic rages on. I'm guessing a concern about contagion is why Paul steered very clear of the gospel reading last week in which Jesus's disciples caused a stir, because they didn't wash their hands properly before meals. Funny how that one wasn't among the verses my father, the Bible professor, had us memorize when we were kids. If he had, I would have latched onto it with great fervor at the end of every summer day when Mom called us in from our Wiffleball games and told us to wash up for supper. Oh, to go back in time, so I could put on my best grimy little cherub face, and say, "But, Mom. I think we all know what Jesus said about hand washing."

Purity codes are as old as...well, I'm guessing they're about as old as dirt. Literally. They almost certainly arose first as ways to keep a community safe from disease and infection. But Jesus pushed back against some of these practices in his own religious culture because they had become weaponized. Some of them had been used to exclude certain people and help the so-called pure ones feel superior, even more beloved by God. So, he violated especially some of the customs that grew up around the original practices, and he reached out intentionally to the people these customs had designated as "unclean." Read the gospels. This work is pretty central to the ministry of Jesus, wouldn't you agree?

But something else started to happen once the followers of Jesus began to embrace his critique of those holiness codes. Theology in ancient Judaism was grounded in practices. Practices like sabbath keeping and jubilee economics and what we now call keeping kosher. They were meant to help a community protect the vulnerable and remind it of the gift of the earth's fruitfulness and ground it in the sacredness of ordinary, life-sustaining acts like eating together. Unfortunately, even practices as beautiful as these can be wielded to do the opposite of what they were made for. But as those early Christians began to shift emphasis from works and Law toward faith and grace, another danger emerged. And it emerged right away.

One way I've come to think about the shift is that the purity codes moved out of the realm of physical things — bodies and food and economics — and into the realm of ideas. Paul told the Ephesians that, "...by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast..." In

other words, it's essential that you understand that your salvation, your belovedness and acceptance by God, is not something you've achieved for yourself or accomplished because of what you have done with your life. That was never the Law's intent either. But we all want credit for the good things we do, so there's a certain appeal to thinking that God's acceptance of us is, at least in part, a reward for our goodness. Well, it is if we think we've been good enough to be accepted, at least.

The problem is that a theology of salvation by grace through faith can be turned on its head in the very same way the Law had been. It's just that now, rather than proving my belovedness to God by pointing out how well I've followed God's rules for living, I'll tell you about what I believe. I'll tell you about how much trust I have in Jesus or how much faith I have in the power of the cross. But look what's just happened. If I think God accepts and forgives me because I believe the right things... well, aren't we right back where we fell off the grace wagon before? We just replaced the practices of the Law with beliefs that we hold in our heads. Faith is the new works. And what we find very quickly is that you don't actually need a complex system of practices and holiness codes to believe that you are one of the pure ones and that those other sorts of people are unclean. You can do the very same work with nothing more than an idea you hold in your head. I'm pure, because I'm right.

And let's be real. You can think you're pure because you're right about ethical issues or childrearing strategies or how much you trust science in a pandemic or which party platform you ascribe to... Believing I'm pure because I hold the right opinions in my head has never been limited to the realm of religion, has it? "Where, and by what criteria, do you make distinctions among yourselves?" James asks us. You'll learn a lot about yourself if you can bear to answer this truthfully.

Martin Luther famously called James an epistle of straw. High as his view of scripture was, Luther thought this particular book was fit only to be burned. Because he thought it stood in opposition to the gospel of grace. But I don't think James was opposed to grace. He was wisely worried about purity codes moving over into the realm of ideas and then doing the same divisive work that the Law had been used to do.

It's helpful that we read as much of James 2 as we did today. Because before it gets to that famous line about faith without works of mercy being dead, it begins with a warning against ordinary favoritism. And James tells us the point of what he's about to say in the very first sentence. He doesn't say, "You're being bad people when you show favoritism and God doesn't like bad people." What he says is this: "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really *believe* in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"

Do you see the difference? James is saying, "I don't think you believe what you say you believe. You don't even believe what you *think* you believe." More broadly, he's saying that if you want to know what anyone believes, don't ask them. Watch them.

So James looked around. And he saw fellow Christians, who said that they believed in the radical leveling of humanity in the way of Jesus, where there was supposedly no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. And yet here were Jesus's people arranging themselves according to the same old criteria the world had always used. He could tell by

their seating charts and the deference they paid to certain kinds of people who dressed certain ways that they didn't believe what they said they believed. It's not that you have to do good works to prove you have faith. It's just that, no matter what you say you believe, what you actually believe will always out. Always. So all James is really asking is that people stop deceiving themselves. Start there. With the truth your life is telling all the time.

It's been more than 20 years since I sat in George Benjamin's Sunday School class at Grace Episcopal Church in Siloam Springs. George was the epitome of a small town doctor and our family physician. When we realized my grandmother was in the hospital on what would be her last day, George was the one who ordered the ambulance transport so she could go home and settle into her favorite chair. And George was the one who would show up at the house a few hours later, search briefly for a pulse and pronounce that she'd gone from this world with a gentle "Amen." In other words, he was the kind of person of whom you didn't just ask an opinion, but someone whose responses to the world you watched. Well, we were studying this passage from James one Sunday, and all these years later, I still remember George clearly, sitting on a folding chair at a table in the parish hall, all 6'5" of him hunched over his Bible, and seeming to wilt a little as the passage was read aloud. When we finished, he looked up and said soberly, "I have done this very thing. And I have done it in this very place, as an usher."

I don't remember anything else that was said that morning. But I do remember the rest of us had the sense not to say anything at all for a moment in the wake of what he said. We sat with him in the unadorned truth that our lives belie every day what we say and even think that we believe. More specifically, we say we affirm the dignity of every human being, and then we don't, in the myriad distinctions and favoritisms that tell us who we are all the time. George's confession remains among the truest and most artless I've ever heard.

St. James, you see, had somehow reached across twenty centuries and Martin Luther's cranky objections and still wrenched us out of our heads and into our lives. And, I tell you, it was a moment of grace. Because, as humbling as it was sit with the gaping void of hypocrisy between what we say we believe and what our lives show so clearly to be the truth, what came crashing down was not our self esteem. What fell were the structures of distinction that we build up between our lives and others all the time. The structures of favoritism that continue to divide us not only from one another, but from ourselves.

So, yes. I'm trying to increase my tolerance for contamination. Because I'm still really good at building purity codes that help block my view of what my life shows clearly that I believe. Honestly, I think I create a new holiness code, a new boundary between clean and unclean, every time I fail to see another person's action or opinion as harmful or helpful in itself, and instead it becomes evidence that the person who did, or said, or thought that thing is in a category of people I despise or just think I'm better or more enlightened than. That category is the distinction that the way of Jesus and the truthfulness of James still have the power to bring down. I've seen it happen.

And the real miracle of grace is that when it does, we see that, regardless of we've been trying to convince ourselves we believe, what we know deeper down is that we're all

on the impure and imperfect side of the boundaries we build. We're all waiting for Jesus to reach across them, even to the likes of us as we struggle... how did our collect put it? Not to confide in our own strength [or goodness or purity], but to make our boast of God's mercy, in which there truly are no distinctions, no favorites, no divisions. The one perfect mercy in which there is truly room for all of us.