

**Enacted Faith**  
**James 2:1-10, 14-17**  
**Jennie Clark**

About six months ago I ordered a lovely blue yoga mat to practice yoga at home. This summer I packed my yoga mat into the car to take with me on vacation. From what I've told you so far, you might conclude that I practice yoga. However, you would be wrong.

I had every good intention of taking up yoga, but the sad truth is that my yoga mat was only just used for the first time this weekend. Still rolled up and sealed in the packaging in which it arrived, I leaned it against my open front door to prevent it from blowing shut.

Turns out a sealed, rolled-up yoga mat makes a great door stop! My husband rolls his eyes and shakes his head at me. Yeah . . . I fancy myself as a practitioner of yoga, but my inaction tells a different story.

In today's text, James reminds the church of the importance of practicing what we say we believe and who we claim to be as Christ's followers by the way we treat the poor and marginalized.

In last week's sermon, Jon mentioned how themes introduced in the opening chapter of James reappear in more detail in the following chapters. The second chapter of James is such an example, building upon the idea in chapter one that says, '*pure religion*' is demonstrated by "*caring for widows and orphans in their distress.*" (1:27)

Chapter two opens with James taking the church to task for their behavior towards the poor saying: "*My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?*"(2:1)

He calls them out for making distinctions among themselves, showing partiality towards the wealthy, while dishonoring the poor. He chides them for noticing and offering a seat to those adorned with gold rings and fine clothes, while telling the poor among them to stand or sit at their feet.

It is helpful to remember that the church to whom James writes exists *within* and is influenced *by* a wider Greek culture based on hierarchical relationships. There were always those above you to whom you paid homage as well as those who ranked beneath you. Everyone knew their place.

Witnessing such worldly and cultural values and attitudes taking root in this early church, James is concerned for their spiritual wellbeing. Their behavior is mimicking the world and culture around them, rather than aligning with the ethos of God's kingdom. Their actions betray their faith, betray their profession that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Because they are spiritually heading off course, by showing deference to the wealthy, James reminds them of the honored position the poor have in God's kingdom saying: *"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?" (2:5)* James echoes Jesus, when Jesus says: *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."* (Luke 6:20)

Imagine the excitement rippling through the congregation that day as they head to church, having hearing that a letter from the apostle James had arrived for them. *We've got mail!*

Then imagine attending the service in this small house church of about 30 or so people. They are packed in tight quarters as the letter is read aloud. *Talk about awkward!* Imagine the growing unease as they hear these words. Picture in your mind the squirming among those who have been offered a prominent seat and among those relegated to the margins.

This letter from James shines a bright light on the elephant in the room, raising two concerns in today's text:

1. for the poor in the church who demonstrate courageous faith, by showing up for worship despite how they are dishonored.
2. And for the wealthy and socially acceptable in the congregation who demonstrate a shallow faith through their arrogant, privileged attitudes and behavior.

While it's tempting to bad mouth those demonstrating such shallow faith, that's not what James does. He embraces both: those with humble, deep faith *and* those with hypocritical, shallow faith, urging both to fulfill the royal law that Jesus calls one of the greatest commandments: *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* (James 2:8, Matthew 22:39)

From the beginning those who profess Jesus Christ as Lord, are called to put their Christian faith into practice. Through the centuries as this letter from James is read, he continues to remind the Church of our calling to:

- to live and act from the values of God's kingdom,
- to regard those despised or marginalized by the world as heirs of God's kingdom
- to honor them with hospitality, mirroring God's love.

There was a time when in some churches, pews were purchased by congregants for their family to sit in. Certain areas of the church were considered more desirable, perhaps offering a better view of the service, or making a certain family or person more prominent or visible to their neighbors during worship. Wealthier members often expected more prestigious seating as a reward for their financial contributions to the upkeep of the church.

Until the early twentieth century, in the United States it was a common practice in Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian churches to rent pews to families or individuals as a way of raising income and establishing a type of social status within the congregation through seating.

In 1892, Westminster Presbyterian was formed out of a disagreement among some members of First Presbyterian in West Chester regarding pew rents. Those who couldn't square the practice of pew rents with their faith, departed to form a new church, Westminster Presbyterian, where they advertised its "free seats, supported by voluntary contributions." Eventually First Presbyterian did away with pew rents as well.

Just as Westminster's founding members wrestled with dissonances between Christian faith and practice, so may we today wrestle against worldly attitudes and practices that might damage our Christian witness and betray the ethos of God's kingdom in which we are meant to live, where the poor and vulnerable are valued and honored.

Jim Wallace tells the story of Mary Glover who was part of a neighborhood food program in Washington D.C., where every Saturday morning, hundreds of people in need came to receive groceries. Mary was elderly, in need of food assistance, and was one of the volunteers. Before the doors opened each week, Mary used to hold hands and pray with the other volunteers.

Mary prayed like she'd been carrying on a conversation with the Lord for a long time saying, *"Thank you, Lord, for waking me up this morning that the walls of my room were not the walls of my grave and my bed was not my cooling board. Thank you, Lord. "*Then she prayed these words as poor families waited outside to come in. *"Lord, we know that you will be coming through this line today, so, Lord, help us to treat you well."*<sup>1</sup>

Mary lives out God's radical love. Like Mary, we are called to put our faith into practice, pursuing justice wherever the economic gap between poverty and wealth is great.

So where might we find examples of such living faith at Westminster? Where might we discern the working of God's hand among us, building the kingdom that is yet to be? Well for starters we find it:

- in gleaning gardens
- in advocating for justice for the poor and marginalized
- in working to eradicate systemic poverty as a PC(USA) Matthew 25 congregation
- by sponsoring vulnerable children through World Vision
- through sharing food and diaper donations
- partnering providing shelter for those experiencing homelessness
- through building affordable housing
- through partnering with local, national and global missions

The list could go on. . .

“James challenges all Christians, rich and poor, to love one another as brothers and sisters; to merge our differing self-understandings into a new, enlarged, and rich unity of identity as faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, *who does not show partiality (Mark 12:14) but invites both the poor and the sinner to his table.*”<sup>2</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Word on the Streets, Justice for the Poor Bible Study, [https://www.wordonthestreets.net/Articles/492682/Justice\\_for\\_the.aspx](https://www.wordonthestreets.net/Articles/492682/Justice_for_the.aspx)
2. Archie Smith Jr., *Feasting on the Word year B, vol. 4*