

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking: 'Brothers and sisters, equal in the eyes of God. Gathered here together in this time and space where all are equal, take your seat. Whether you are in your Sunday best or dressed down for the weekend (or even still in your nightclothes at home) know that your presence brings delight. Come as we worship together.'

Hymn CH4 120 – God we praise you.

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

Mighty God, King of Kings, Lord of Hosts... How hard it is, indefinable and unnameable One, for us to know what to call you! We want a title that will show our respect without taking us out of the upside-down world of the Kingdom that Jesus came to establish, and back into the oppressive hierarchies of this world, to which he was so utterly opposed.

Have we fallen down a rabbit-hole, or stepped through the looking-glass when we hear of children sitting in the seats of power, beggars and street urchins attending a royal wedding, not as waiters or kitchen staff, but as honoured guests, while the King himself kneels down and washes their feet?

Our Brother... our Companion... the Servant King... no names or titles can capture it all. Not for nothing did you tell Moses, "Don't worry about my name— I just AM!" So perhaps we should simply be quiet for a moment or two, and let the crazy, wonderful mystery of your being fill and surround us.

Silence

You value people for who they are, not how much they possess. You notice the invisible ones; you hear the silent ones. You see the potential in those who have long since written themselves off as worthless. You shower compassion on those

who have been most harshly judged, and you judge the powerful and the privileged by how much compassion they show.

Forgive us, gracious God, for our every failure to see, or to listen or to care. Flood us with your mercy and your grace, and perhaps then we can start becoming what you have called us to be: your eyes, your ears, your hands, your feet and your heart in this world that you made and have never stopped loving.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Reading: James 2: 1– 17

2 My friends, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, you must never treat people in different ways according to their outward appearance.² Suppose a rich man wearing a gold ring and fine clothes comes to your meeting, and a poor man in ragged clothes also comes.³ If you show more respect to the well-dressed man and say to him, "Have this best seat here," but say to the poor man, "Stand over there, or sit here on the floor by my feet,"⁴ then you are guilty of creating distinctions among yourselves and of making judgments based on evil motives.

⁵ Listen, my dear friends! God chose the poor people of this world to be rich in faith and to possess the kingdom which he promised to those who love him.⁶ But you dishonour the poor! Who are the ones who oppress you and drag you before the judges? The rich!⁷ They are the ones who speak evil of that good name which has been given to you.

⁸ You will be doing the right thing if you obey the law of the Kingdom, which is found in the scripture, "Love your neighbour as you love yourself."⁹ But if you treat people according to their outward appearance, you are guilty of sin, and

the Law condemns you as a lawbreaker. ¹⁰ Whoever breaks one commandment is guilty of breaking them all. ¹¹ For the same one who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Even if you do not commit adultery, you have become a lawbreaker if you commit murder. ¹² Speak and act as people who will be judged by the law that sets us free. ¹³ For God will not show mercy when he judges the person who has not been merciful; but mercy triumphs over judgment.

¹⁴ My friends, what good is it for one of you to say that you have faith if your actions do not prove it? Can that faith save you? ¹⁵ Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. ¹⁶ What good is there in your saying to them, “God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!”—if you don't give them the necessities of life? ¹⁷ So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead.

All Age Talk

Hymn CH4 360 – Jesus Christ is waiting,

Sermon – ‘Favourites?’

Have you ever found yourself having to choose, between several different choices, and you just could not decide? You have looked pondered all the options, and there does not seem to be one right answer, one perfect solution. So, you ask for some help. You talk to someone you trust to get their opinion. And after they listen to all those options, they just shrugged their shoulders and say, “Do whatever you think is best. You’ll just have to make a judgment call.”

Now, I do not want to push anyone’s ‘buttons’ but we often see this scenario play out in football. The referee must decide – to award a penalty or a free kick to the defending team, and, unsure what to choose, he seeks some assistance from VAR – or to give he or she their full title the Video Assistant Referee.

As they debate, television and radio commentators, debate: did the defender touch the ball or did she take out the opposing striker. Did the defender bundle the striker over, or did he just do an impersonation of a submarine? The referee stands with their hand at their ear listening to VAR – and then they are encouraged to review what happened for themselves on a little screen. Yet, no

matter what decision is made the match must continue. Everyone depends on the referee's best judgment to make the final call.

We make judgments all the time. We make choices based on the best information we can gather. Sometimes those choices are good ones, and sometimes we make poor choices. Either way, every choice we make is a judgment call.

However, there's a difference between judging and being judgmental. Judgment holds our decisions accountable to a standard, often one we didn't create. For Christians, that standard is the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Yet, when we get *judgmental*, we start comparing ourselves to other people, the standard we often use is our own ego.

When we get judgmental, we might compare ourselves to someone else and decide that we are better than they are. Of course, we don't put it like that. Instead, we focus on what's wrong with the other person, the mistakes *they've* made. It's easy to look down on someone who doesn't measure up to our standard – but it might be difficult for us to see that the standard we are using is our own view of ourselves.

Sometimes our judgmentalism tells us that other people are better than *we* are, too. We see them as more successful, more intelligent, more lovable than we are. It works both ways. Whether we think we are morally superior to someone else, or somehow inferior, the problem is that we are being judgmental. That affects the way we treat people. And it can lead us into sin.

Last Sunday, Gillian began a short new series, for us, from the book of James. Works." You may remember that Gillian explained that James is the half-brother of Jesus and in his little book, James provides for us an instruction manual for Christian living. The dos and the don'ts, with associated benefits and warnings attached.

From the opening sentence of today's reading, it appears we have reached a section with warnings: *"My friends, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, you must never treat people in different ways according to their outward appearance."* It sounds as if James is challenging the sincerity of our faith in Jesus! Can you really call yourselves Christians if you show favouritism to one person and disdain to another? Other Bible translations read: "Hold the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ without acts of favouritism."

Hold the faith. That puts a little different slant on verse one. Instead of asking us if we are really Christians, James encourages us to show our faith by the way we treat people with fairness and impartiality.

Now, whether you think of it as a challenging or an encouraging statement, one thing is clear: favouritism within the church is a sin. And it seems that the early church had just as much trouble as we do when it comes to ignoring the poor to show favour to the rich.

Imagine that you are the part of one of our welcome teams, on duty one Sunday, when a visitor comes through the door dressed in expensive clothes, wearing elegant jewellery, and walking with an air of importance. Right behind this person is another visitor, wearing dirty clothes that are torn, carrying a backpack that has seen better days, and smelling like it's been a while since they have taken a shower.

Are you going to welcome them the same way? I am hoping you will, because you all are polite people but where will you encourage them to sit? Will you seat the well-dressed person next to the church member you think will impress them the most? Will you seat the smelly backpacker in that same pew – or as far away as possible, maybe in the last row under the balcony? Maybe out in the vestibule? What assumptions have we already made about these two guests, based on their appearance and their ... aroma? If you're the one who passes the offering plate to these two guests, what are your expectations about the amount they will put into the plate?

James writes that we shouldn't make any distinctions, because showing partiality to one person or another divides the community. Playing favourites tears apart the Body of Christ and damages our witness to the world. Besides, when we show favour to the rich at the expense of the poor, we go against everything Jesus taught. Throughout Scripture, we read repeatedly that God honours the poor and oppressed, not the oppressors.

God cares about the poor. God has always cared about the poor and there is something in this passage from James that we might not fully understand, reading from the perspective of our 21st century middle class comfort. The people to whom James was writing were most likely poor themselves.

We run the same risk today, of allowing oppression generated by secular social structures to dictate our moral values. We don't like to think about the ways our treatment of the poor keeps them poor, and dependent on our generosity or

the work of government. We don't like to think about making a deeper commitment to helping them learn new skills and habits that will break the cycle of poverty, because we would rather spend a few pounds to provide handouts than invest our time and energy in building relationships.

James is warning us, as much as he was warning his first century audience. Instead of following the world's value system, a system that often makes the rich richer and the poor poorer, James reminds us of the 'greatest commandment' – love your neighbour as yourself.

This is the core message of Jesus. Love God first and love your neighbour as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two primary rules for life (Matthew 22:40). In order to love our neighbours, we have to spend time with them, get to know them, live in close proximity to them.

This brings us to another place where we can stumble. Loving our *neighbour* isn't always difficult; sometimes it's loving *ourselves* that catches us up short. We don't want to be labelled as narcissists. We don't want to be accused of thinking too highly of ourselves.

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" (Romans 12:3).

So, we are careful to practice a kind of humility that isn't humble at all. American Theologian, J. D. Walt writes, "According to Scripture, the opposite of humility is not pride but selfishness. And therein lies the problem with our definitions. They are all self-referential. We can't even talk about humility without somehow referencing the self. Here's what I'm slowly learning. Humility is not about self at all. Humility is all about others. Humility is not putting yourself down. That's false humility. Humility is about lifting others up."

Which brings us back to the 'greatest commandment,' to love others as we love ourselves. It isn't about us at all. It's about loving others; the ones in fine clothes, and the ones in smelly rags. No favourites – or rather, *all* favoured.

For when we do that, mercy triumphs over judgment. Love wins over pride. Caring brings us to mutual freedom. When we favour each person, we meet and recognize that person as someone God loves so deeply, that He would become a human just to die for them, we become part of something beyond ourselves. We become a part of the Kingdom of God that Jesus came to introduce.

Showing God's favour to each person we meet does something else, too. It builds our faith into a faith that really works. As our faith grows stronger, and our love for God grows deeper, we will find that favouring one person over another makes no sense anymore.

God has showered his favour on us so that we might share it with all, rich and poor, young, and old, powerful, and powerless. Today, this little instruction manual, written by James all those years ago, shows us that God has no favourites, for each of us is God's own beloved child.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hymn CH4 259 – Beauty for brokenness,

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Lord God, you have given us everything we have and are. You gave us what we have given and what we have kept. Use all that we bring this day to bring others to Jesus, and what we have kept for your glory.

Father of all, awaken us to joy in the mystery of Your presence at the heart of all things. For day by day You hold us in love.

Saviour of all, call us to holiness, to all that is beautiful and good and true. For day by day You walk with us along life's road.

Spirit of all, let us feel Your breeze upon our face. For day by day You are within us and around. Prompting, comforting, challenging, inspiring, leading us in the ways of God.

Ever present God, in whom we are richly blessed, teach us to use Your gifts with gladness and care. Bless us with kind hearts and caring eyes to notice the lost and the least and lead us to live bravely in the way of Christ and His cross.

God of surprising grace, in our weakness You are our strength, in our darkness You are our light, in our sorrows You are our comfort and peace and from everlasting to everlasting You are our God.

As we bless You for the life of this congregation, our life together in the church, we pray for the health and well-being of the church worldwide and all the variety of its worship and witness. Let Your church give heart and voice to Your continuing concern for people who are afraid and in need.

We pray for the hotspots of our world Father, where anger burns, fear reigns and many innocent people are caught in the crossfire.

Inspire compassion and generosity in all our hearts. Bless those who work to provide rescue and shelter and those who seek just ways of bringing the exodus in human misery to an end.

We pray for our own nation, that in all the opportunities and challenges of these days we will be free from the inequalities and divisions that threaten to impoverish our common life.

As in Christ's presence people found healing and calm, we pray for those left feeling betrayed or left behind, whose hearts are filled with anger. People who face days of illness and treatment, or whose earthly life draws to its close, all who long for comfort and peace in the storms of their life.

Father, you know everything about us, our loved ones, our friends, our neighbours and our colleagues. As we pray together, we take time to name and pray for someone we love, someone we know who is experiencing great pain today – grieving for a loved one, fearful of the future, not sure what life holds for them. We also pray for someone experiencing great joy today – the birth of a baby, a birthday, a new job, a wedding. As we name that someone, we pray they will feel the presence, the healing, the love and the grace of the Living God with them...

For the new way of life, You have set before us in Christ. For Your truth to inspire us and Your love to sustain us. For the dawning of Your kingdom and all who work towards its fulfillment, we bless You and give You our thanks.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning is now and shall be for evermore. Amen

Hymn CH4 706 – For the healing of the nations,

Benediction

Nurtured, loved, and challenged: go in the beauty of God the Maker, go in the love of Jesus the Healer, go in the challenge of the Holy Spirit. Go to love and serve. So, may the Blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Spirit rest upon you and all whom you love this day and always. Amen.