

Putting Your Faith to Work- Pandora's Box

James 2: 1-13

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We've all heard this saying, "Be careful. Don't open Pandora's Box." The saying comes from Greek mythology and describes what happened when Pandora opened the box that had been entrusted into her care. In the original telling it was not a box, but instead a great big urn. When Pandora opened it, all the ills and misfortunes that plague humanity were released into the world. I'm pretty sure that James was not thinking of Pandora's Box when he wrote the passage of Scripture that was read this morning. However, perhaps he should have because showing favoritism is like opening a Pandora's Box of troubles and woes. Favoritism is defined as "the showing of more kindness and indulgence to some person or persons than to others." It is also described as "being unfairly partial." All of us, I am sure, have seen or been made aware of situations where favoritism was shown. Whether at home, at work, or even in the church, it can bring about great harm. Showing favoritism is most assuredly like opening Pandora's Box. These are some of the things that can emerge when people feel that they have been unfairly treated: jealousy, resentment, aggression, anxiety, depression and lots of bad behavior.

You have probably seen some of it in the work place when the boss gives promotions to those who are his friends. Or the child who receives special attention by his or her parents when the other siblings are all but forgotten. Yes, favoritism can even worm its way into the life of a church. In fact, Paul describes just such a situation in his first letter to the Corinthians. In the early days of the church, Christians would gather together for what has come to be known as love feasts. Everyone would bring something to share, sort of like a covered dish dinner. Then at the conclusion of the dinner, the church family would celebrate the Lord's Supper together. Unfortunately things had gone terribly wrong at Corinth. Here is what Paul had to say about the way that celebration was being conducted in their church. "It's not the Lord's Supper you are concerned about when you come together. For I am told that some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. What? Is this really true? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace the church of God and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say about these things? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly do not!" (1 Corinthians 20-22) In other words, the wealthier and more well to do folks in the church were excluding the poorer members from sharing in the bounty that should have been shared with everyone. It was a clear case not only of discrimination, but of favoritism. As is clearly indicated, Paul disapproved of this kind of behavior. Furthermore, there were repercussions. Paul accused those who were pursuing this kind of behavior of profaning the Lord's Supper, partaking of it in an unworthy manner. As a result he told them, "That is why some of you are weak and sick and some have even died." (1 Corinthians 11:30)

Perhaps it was just such a situation that led James to speak about favoritism in his letter to fellow Jewish Christians. Let's see what he had to say. He begins by giving us an example reflecting the days and times in which he lived. Let's take a

look at verses one through four. In the ancient world wearing a ring was a sign of wealth and prestige. The more rings you wore the higher your standing on the social ladder. It was easy therefore to welcome those kind of folks with open arms as opposed to those of lesser stature. Their financial standing could be beneficial to the life of a church. James, however, had a problem with that kind of prejudice. He rightly called it the kind of discrimination which was motivated by greed. Look what these rich people have to offer as opposed to those who are needy and will drain our resources. Perhaps he was remembering what had happened right there in Jerusalem in the early days of the church. A dispute had arisen. The Greek speaking widows, women who had no means of supporting themselves since that were not natives of Judea, would be left out in the daily distribution of food. Like the situation in Corinth, it was an obvious example of favoritism, showing more regard for the one group of people as opposed to another. The formation of the deacons in Acts, chapter six, had solved the problem, but it was a reminder of what could happen. Therefore, James spoke about it in his letter.

Then in verses five through nine, he went on to remind his readers that God had "chosen the poor in eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom." He was, in fact, reflecting what Jesus had to say as well as what Jesus did. Jesus loved everyone, but he had a special place in His heart for the poor and the lowly. Yes, on occasion He ate in the homes of the wealthy and spoke about the Kingdom of God with those who were well educated and well to-do like Nicodemis. However, if you examine the Scriptures, you find Him spending most of His time with those on the sidelines of life—the hungry, the sick and the forgotten. When Jesus returned to Nazareth and spoke in the local synagogue quoting the prophet Isaiah He said, "He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor," (Luke 4:18) In fact, in referring to the royal law, James was reminding his readers that Jesus said that caring for one's neighbors was the second great commandment. Not only that, if you remember the parable of the Good Samaritan, one's neighbor is not only the person who lives next to you, but any person who needs your love and attention.

Then to wrap things up James says that showing favoritism makes an individual a law breaker. Even if he keeps all of the other laws, he or she is still a law breaker if this one is broken. Sort of like driving down the road. You may stop at every red light and use your turn signal every time you make a turn. But if you get caught for speeding, even if you have kept all of the other laws about good driving, you're still a law breaker. So realizing that we're all prone to step over the line now and then, even with regards to how we treat others, its better, James says, to be merciful instead of judgmental, looking down on those who are less fortunate and perhaps even less deserving than we are. Otherwise, we too might find ourselves in the judgement seat of the accused when we stand before God.

So what does this have to say to you and me, especially as we prepare to partake of the Lord's Supper. One memory from my early days in seminary speaks eloquently to what James is saying to us. A fellow student was the pastor of a country church. Not too far from the church there was a small, Native American Indian reservation. It was an impoverished community with a lot of children. The pastor's heart went out to them and he invited them, especially the children, to come and be a part of their Sunday school. The tribal group took him up on his offer and sent a number of their children to the church one Sunday. After the

service was over and the children had returned home, the leaders of the church came to the pastor. They said, "We don't want those kind of children to come to our church. You should not have invited them." In response, the pastor replied, "In that case, you will need to call a new pastor. I will not be a part of a congregation that discriminates against those who so desperately need the love of Jesus." I'll always remember his courageous stand against those whose favoritism was so un-Christlike. And that's why I'm glad to be a part of a church that opens its arms and embraces all of those who are in need. May it be never be said of us that we play favorites at Bedford Presbyterian.