

“The Subtlety of Privilege”

Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Proverbs 22 (selections); James 2:1-10,14-17; Mark 7:24-30

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September 6, 2015

This morning, we continue our sojourn with the Letter of James. I encourage you to read its five chapters as we travel through the book, hearing as they we could summarize as: “how to live a faithful life within the temptations of a multi-cultural world.” This morning we will hear the familiar, “Faith without works is dead,” the oft-quoted mantra of the social action crowd, but as James reminds, putting the phrase on a car bumper or refrigerator magnet is not enough. Let us hear our epistle lesson in the second chapter of James, beginning with the first verse.

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, ³and 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,” ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵Listen, 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 promised to those who love God?

⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?

¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

In our Gospel reading, we have a healing of a child from a distance, but my attention in this text is often drawn to the woman who requests Jesus heal her daughter, is refused, and then counters what seems to be the insult of Jesus calling her kind of people “dogs.”

For centuries, scholars have debated this passage, which also appears in Matthew. Apologists suggest either Jesus was weary and misspoke, or the meaning of the phrase was less caustic in his day than ours. I am not sure we need to explain Jesus’ words, or even their perceived roughness, but we do note his response changes after the woman speaks. Let us read this encounter in our Gospel lesson in Mark 7:24-30:

From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵ and a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and came and bowed down at his feet.²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.²⁷ Jesus said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."²⁸ But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."²⁹ Then Jesus said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

James' tells the story of a poor man receiving a cruel greeting at a synagogue. My guess is such an offensive welcome would be rare today, though I believe there may be subtle differences in how rich and poor persons are greeted that may be just as hurtful. I seek to treat all people equally, but I am aware I am affected by factors such as dress or smell, grammar or accent, race or gender; if I am the only one with such subtle biases, then please bear with me as I sort through my shortcomings.

Within a month of our move from Pittsburgh to Albany in 2006, my mother had a second stroke. We visited her frequently in the hospital and in rehab, as did my father who would drive himself and stay longer. One day I mentioned to him it might be good if he wore something different than the old flannel shirts and the clean, but somewhat stained pants he often put on. I can't recall if he asked me why I was making the suggestion, or simply told me to mind my own business. I do recall feeling I had overstepped a boundary.

The reason I made the suggestion was not my own embarrassment, but a deep concern for how my father would be viewed and treated. How one is dressed can make a difference in how one is regarded, particularly by strangers. Combined with a memory that was beginning to fail, I was concerned his disheveled look would result in the father I greatly respected being disrespected by others.

As the years went on, I soon accompanied my parents to every medical appointment, not because of my father's dress, but because someone needed to be with them to ensure clarity with the doctors. Aware how one looks can affect how one is regarded, I dressed well, sometimes consciously wearing what a friend once called my "power tie," because of its color.

Jesus' encounter with the woman who desired healing for her daughter seems to introduce the notion of privilege to this discussion of looks. The woman had a number of factors against her when she approached Jesus. First, Jesus had wanted to be left alone, hoping the house he entered would give him a temporary sanctuary of quiet. The woman interrupted his desire. Second, this was a woman, one without rights or voice in the first century culture. It would normally be her husband who would request healing for their daughter. Third, she was not Jewish. She was Gentile, so Jesus tells her his first priority is to feed the children, meaning he had come for the Jewish people. And then, Jesus uses that derogatory term "dogs" to name the woman's kind.

As I read the story, when the woman responds “*Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,*” she prompts a dramatic change in Jesus. His insult is now replaced by a promise. The healing refused is now completed, and at a distance at that, for Jesus did not even go to the home of the woman. I believe it is possible Jesus’ mind and heart may have been changed by the woman, without diminishing him.

Jesus was a Jewish male, which gave him certain cultural privilege within the faith community. It is the idea of privilege I would like to discuss for the remainder of this message; not so much the privilege accorded to one by one’s dress, or even that defined by obvious wealth, but what I have termed the subtlety of privilege.

I am a straight, white, able-bodied, male. Three of those defining marks are visible, but all four accord me privileges in our culture. I did nothing to earn those privileges, which is my point. With laws establishing equal rights for all, my privilege is often received in subtle ways, without acknowledgment, and I suspect often unconsciously. For example, if Lynn and I go shopping, there is little chance a plainclothes security person will follow us around the department store. If we hold hands, it will likely turn no heads. If I question a transaction, there is a good chance my concern will be taken seriously.

I may have shared before a conversation with the wife of a prominent, respected, recently retired couple who were members of a church I served. Both were well educated and always well dressed, so my ears were opened when she shared that when she and her husband stepped onto an elevator, white women often clutched their purses. The couple is African American.

I think I had that in mind when I recently stepped off a hospital elevator to visit a neighbor who had had surgery. As I walked down the hospital hallway, it dawned on me I would likely never have to wonder how my hospital roommate would react when he or his family saw I was white.

Perhaps just because of equal rights legislation, we are called upon to be more aware of such subtleties of privilege – race privilege, sexual identity privilege, able-bodied privilege, gender privilege. Such privilege is different than that which we can control by our dress.

I find subtle privilege in our James reading. It is the privilege of wealth, or perhaps a better phrase would be the privilege of resources, for few of us would say we are wealthy. I once heard Ben Stein interviewed by Tavis Smiley. While I tend to differ with his politics, on certain social issues Ben Stein and I see eye to eye. He offered the following illustration about privilege:

“People like you and me go to the grocery store; we just throw whatever we want in the grocery cart and go to the checkout counter. For millions, tens of millions of Americans, they have to think very carefully about every item they buy.” [Ben Stein on “Tavis Smiley” PBS program, Aug. 30, 2012.]

One way to identify subtle privilege is the ability to choose. Even if we are not able to throw everything we want in our grocery cart, I suspect few of us arrive at the checkout counter and have to remove an item because we don't have enough cash. We don't likely think about whether we have enough gas to make trips to the grocery store or church, and still have enough to drive to work until the next payday. Someone once ran into and totaled our parked car, and while we had the inconvenience of having to purchase another car, our primary decision was not if we could buy a car, but the choice of whether we would pay cash. That is the privilege of choice.

Another way to identify subtle privilege is the ability to escape or withdraw. When our son served in the Peace Corps, he was stationed deep in the rain forests of Gabon. He was far from any medical care if there had been a dire emergency; yet, even as isolated as he was, he really did have the ability to escape or withdraw if it became necessary. Those in his village did not. I think of those who are locked into living in violent inner city neighborhoods, because they lack the resources to move to a safer place.

In a different way, many of us support organizations doing what we believe is important work; yet, if we have a problem with the organization, we have the privilege and power to threaten to withhold our support.

To seek to encompass the subtleties of privilege in a single sermon is futile, and it is probably better to be discussed in a class where we can share experiences. I offer my thoughts this morning simply to encourage us each to begin to recognize the ways in which we are privileged, particularly in subtle ways.

In a very real sense, I believe Jesus may have set aside his privilege in his encounter with the Gentile woman. He has not only moved her from the position of dog under the table, but given her a seat at his table. Right after this, he will open the ears and loose the tongue of the deaf and mute man. One might wonder if it symbolizes Jesus' own ears having been opened by the Gentile woman, and his giving her voice at the table.

May we recall this act of Jesus as he invites us to dine at his table this morning. As we share the bread and cup as a community, may we also ponder our own subtle privilege.