

14th Sunday after Pentecost
Text: James 2:1-17
Preacher: Vicar Stephanie Kershner

St. Peter's – Lafayette Hill, PA
September 6, 2009

“Where is the love?”

I'm going to admit to you all one of my guilty pleasures. I love pop culture. Anything to do with television and movies. I am not addicted to the celebrity blogs and online tabloids like some of my friends but I do like to be in the know. When I log into my yahoo account I often click on the news items that pop up about celebrities. I check out the pictures. See who's dating, or marrying, or divorcing. Or who is pregnant, or who just got out of rehab. I like to be on the up and up about who is starring in what movie with which director. And I love all the awards shows. The Emmy's, the Golden Globes, the Oscars. I love them all.

Living in New York City I've even seen some big superstars on the street. Once I saw Tina Fey outside of a Staples. I saw Cynthia Nixon in the bank. I would often spot Alec Baldwin at the Starbucks next to the church I attended. I even sat two rows behind Elaine Stritch at a funeral a couple years ago.

Union Theological often rents out its property to filming crews. One of the shows that regularly films on campus is Law and Order. I love Law and Order. All three of them. Regular Law and Order, Law and Order Criminal Intent, and my most favorite: Law and Order Special Victims Unit. I believe I have seen every single episode of SVU. When Josh is away on tour he knows not to call during the hours of 10 and 11 on a Tuesday night because I will be totally unresponsive to anything he says because I will be captivated by Law and Order SVU.

When Law and Order would film on campus, I would roam the halls with much anticipation hoping to catch a glimpse of the actors. Hoping I would be able to get them for a photo or just tell them how much I adored them. Luckily for them, I never managed to do anything except admire them from afar.

However, every time I spotted someone famous I would immediately take out my cell phone and call someone. My mom, Josh, my sister, my friend. Someone. You are not going to believe who I just saw! And then I would excitedly tell them where I saw them. What they were wearing. Who they were with. I put celebrities on a pedestal. Even though I have never had a conversation with any of these people. Have never even said hello. I admire them for no other reason than the fact that they are famous and they are good at what they do. Sometimes.

I am not alone in my addiction. Our society eats up celebrity gossip. A couple years ago my best friend emailed me a message with the slogan WWJD? (What Would Jesus Do?) as the title. I have saved that email and read it every once in awhile to remind myself of how I should really be looking at the world around me. This is what it says: When kids are killing the homeless, when welfare is at its worst, when there are hospital scandals, when mountains are being destroyed, and on and on and on. But CNN's top stories are about Anna Nicole Smith's baby's daddy, or how we are “ignoring Paris Hilton”, or that Britney Spears has gone crazy, or that Bobby Brown is finally paying child support... What Would Jesus Do?”

James could easily be writing his letter to us: “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” The Greek word used here for favoritism literally means: “lift up your face.” You show favoritism to a person by lifting up your face.

When I saw those celebrities I lifted up my face. I lifted up my eyes, my cheeks, my smile. My face would come alive. I showed favoritism. But, I will tell you this. Not even a block or two later, I would see a homeless person. A person who was not a celebrity, not famous. A person who didn't look good. A person who didn't smell good. A person who was poor. And I would lower my face. Lower my eyes, my cheeks, my smile. I would not make eye contact. I would try not to see them. I would ignore them. I definitely would not call someone on my cell phone and excitedly talk about how I just saw a homeless person on the street.

We have all lowered our faces. And not just when we see people who are monetarily poor. We have lowered our faces when we see someone who is different than us. A different race, a different gender, a different sexual orientation. We have lowered our faces.

James calls us out on our favoritism: “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture. ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails one point has become accountable for all of it.” James puts us in an uncomfortable position. If we really believe in Jesus, we believe that the commandment to love one's neighbor is important. And if we believe that, then why would we be so indifferent to those who are not like us, those whom we perceive to be lower than us?

For James, faith is what is operative in a person's life. People act on the basis of what they believe to be true. So if people say one thing but do something else, James would say their actual faith is the faith that underlies their actions. People must believe in something if they are to act at all. The question is whether the faith that actually shapes their lives is faith in Jesus Christ or something else.

There is a couple who live in our apartment complex who have been together for over twenty years; Michael and David. Last Sunday they attended a worship service at a church where one of their friends is the organist. They walked in to the church holding hands just like any other couple in love. A woman, a member of the congregation came up to them and slapped their hands and then turned and walked away. This angers me. It breaks my heart. I do not see the love of Jesus in this woman's actions at all. How can someone claim they have faith in Jesus Christ, claim that they follow his teachings, and behave in such a way?

Sometimes when I prepare for a sermon I ask Josh to read the text and then tell me the first thing that comes to his mind. This week after he read the reading from James he said: “You can't just show up. You have to be willing to get your hands dirty.”

James tells us you can't just say you believe. You have to be willing to truly follow the teachings of Christ. You have to do the work. Saying something and actually doing something are two completely different things.

You may be asking: Where is the gospel in this message? Where is the good news? James seems to be sending a very threatening message: Love! Or else God will condemn you! If you treat people like dirt God will treat you like dirt! In the bible I used at seminary, on the very last page of James I wrote in big capital letters and underlined: "SOCIAL JUSTICE – NO GRACE". Martin Luther famously referred to James as "the epistle of straw", something that you could not build your faith on. Luther was frustrated by religious leaders who claimed that James supported their mistaken ideas that people could buy their salvation through monetary gifts to the church. We believe, and teach, as Luther did that salvation can not be earned, it cannot be purchased. It is something that is given to us freely through the death of Jesus on the cross.

James does not talk about the birth of Jesus. James does not talk about the death of Jesus. James does not talk about the gift of grace. However, the book of James does talk about the moral implications of being a Christian. We have been saved by the grace of God through our faith in Jesus Christ. On that last day, when we stand before our God, when we stand before Jesus, our salvation will not be in question. What will be in question is whether or not we have misused the grace that we have been given. Whether we have shown indiscriminate love toward all people. Whether we have allowed the grace and power of God to transform our lives and the lives of those who surround us. If we truly believe in Jesus Christ, if we follow the royal law of Jesus Christ to love our neighbors as ourselves, if we treat all human beings equally, the way God would love and care for them then we *are* living out the gospel of the Lord. Amen.