

Proper 19, 2006

James teaches not to show partiality and Jesus inquires about who people say he is.

There is an old axiom: “clothes makes the man” and I suppose the woman. There is some truth to the expression. My older grandson plays JV soccer for Smithsburg High, where the tradition is that athletes dress up on game day. So we went shopping for slacks, shirts, ties, shoes, and blazers. When Jeremy walked out of the dressing room, his mother and I just starred at him in astonishment – the long tall jeans-t-shirt clad child had transformed into a grown man.

I watch the variety of fashion among students in my classes. I wonder what message each combination sends. Is the position of various body piercing significant? Does the amount of uncovered mid-body matter or say something? Do the pants need to come mid calf or else cover the shoe and provide an extra sole? How about the hair – is color important? I can't read the signs today about what these new fashions say about the person or communicate to other members of the community.

Many years ago I was at a conference in California with one of the Hood Administrators. After a long day of meetings, we decided to walk back to the hotel – and ended up in a shopping mall that featured Neimen Markus. She walked straight to a rack of a particular brand and picked up two new outfits – for a mere \$25,000 – they were on sale. She looked great in the clothing but to tell the truth I could not have guessed the value of them – the in group knew and recognized the brand it is fairly distinctive in cut and design, I guess.

My mother tried to dress me right – she walked the streets downtown and looked at the fashion models – then went home and cut out a pattern and made the dress, suit, skirt, blouse – whatever. It was not her fault that over time I lost interest in fashion, there is just too much else that matters more.

James warns that playing favorites on the basis of status and privilege is counter to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I know there are TV evangelists that assure you that God wants you to prosper – but I have to tell you I don't think God cares about your “status” among human systems of power.

Privilege puts us in a position of being able to offer help. Privilege gives us a unique opportunity that comes from education, having money, clothes, cars, houses, jobs, etc. I have known some poor people who were happier than many of the rich ones. When we race from job to home to something entertaining, zipping about without any limitations, we are free to do whatever we want. Does that freedom make you see others who have need? Does it open your eyes to the world around you? Does it stir your mind with new ideas about mission and ministry or do you only think about how to get more and what to do with it?

The claim to have faith without helping the poor while others may have the gift of charity is pure nonsense according to James. Indeed, faith without works is dead, he proclaims. It makes me wonder what faith is if it does not lead to some interest in other persons, some effort to relieve poverty, some effort to reduce hunger. What kind of faith would that be? Maybe that is the faith that trusts God to care only for me and my immediate circle of family or friends. Maybe that is a faith that trusts God to save room for me in heaven even if I can't find time to come to church or contribute to world hunger. Maybe it is a faith that waits for inspiration to move in a certain direction but it is not time yet. Maybe it is a faith that is waiting for retirement for that final commitment. Interestingly, people in the Middle Ages, often put off baptism until they were on their deathbeds, so they would not sin again. Even Plato knew that evil was the absence of the good. If we do not feed the hungry who will? If the church does not lead in actions of mercy and compassion, why would we expect the government to do it?

Episcopal News Service
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Millennium Development Goals endorsed in joint ecumenical statement

Lutheran, Episcopal presiding bishops call for end to global poverty

[ENS] Urging deeper ecumenical collaboration in the fight against deadly poverty and disease around the world, Presiding Bishop Frank T. Griswold and Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) released a joint pastoral letter September 14, calling on members of both churches to "play a key role building [the] will and holding

governments accountable" for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The pastoral letter, titled "That All May Be One," will be celebrated with a joint Holy Eucharist and renewal of Baptismal vows in the Chapel of Christ the Lord at the Episcopal Church Center in New York City at 12:10 p.m. on Friday, September 15. Hanson will be the celebrant and Griswold the preacher at the service. All are invited to attend the service.

The Bible has a lot to say about hunger. In the Old and New testaments hunger is linked with other terms describing those who have been forced by societal conditions into a marginal existence – the poor, the needy, the widow, the orphan, the oppressed. That God loves and cares for the Poor is the point of Gen 12:10, 42:1, Ps 12:5, Isa 29:19; 25:4, Ps 9:12; 10:12, 132:15, Prov 15:15). The law codes of Deut., Exod, Gen, Lev all speak of making provision for the poor, canceling debt, not holding a cloak in pledge on a cold night. The prophets addressed the point as well, so if we think the law code as too idealistic, we should remember that the prophets called for repentance and a program of justice that addresses the needs of the poor. We are a long way from Amos but his words still catch my attention. We are stewards, not owners of creation. God is not mocked nor is God deceived by our fine words or hollow promises.

Jesus began his ministry reading from Isaiah 61: The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set a liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. Associating himself with the poor and society's outcasts, Jesus went to the cross demonstrating a new kind of power – the power of love that does not take up sword, but power demonstrated in weakness. In Matthew's last parable of the great judgment, (Matt 25:31-46) we hear "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

Scriptures teaches us that God takes the side of the poor and so too the community of faith is called to have a special concern for these persons. Care for the widow and orphan was said to indicate true religion. In the early church as described in Acts, they held all things in common so that all

had enough (Acts 2,4). The responsibility for the action lay with the community to distribute goods to all who had need, it was not up to the poor to come begging.

The long and short of it is simply this, the Gospels, the Epistles, the Old Testament testimony of law and prophets all make it clear that social justice is important to God.

Do you work from a theology of salvation or a theology of blessing? If you are focused on the way God saved us on the cross, human beings are helpless, need redemption, and we do, nevertheless, if we leave that redemption on a cross 2000 years ago in history, we may not feel the saving presence of God in this moment, in this place, in this community. The wisdom literature teaches us that God is present with us, intends the fullness of life for the human community as a present goal and not some endpoint of history. We should not withhold care just because we think some people will have a better place once in heaven. It is my sincere belief that God wants us to experience an abundant life in the here and now – that is the message of Grace.

Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “you are the Christ.” There are words and there is faith and there are deeds that put our faith into action – who do you say that Jesus is?