**James 2:1-10,14-18 September 5, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Epistle lesson, James chapter 2 here re-reading these words. “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say ‘You sit here in a good place’ while you say to the poor man ’You stand over there’ or “Sit down at my feet,” Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Have you ever thought about why celebrities, athletes, politicians, and people who seem to have quite a bit of money, and power, and fame receive things for free from companies? I’m sure we’ve all heard the stories, someone famous walks into a store and the store just gives them something for free. But why? What sense does that make? Here is a person who has an abundance of money and can certainly afford a cup of expensive coffee, or a new car, or to eat an expensive meal, yet they get it for free. Perhaps that item isn’t really free after all, it’s just something that this company decides to pay for out of their own pockets, in order to gain favor from this important, influential, and rich person. It’s free advertising to see someone famous holding a cup from your restaurant photographed while walking down the street. They become a walking commercial when they are seen driving your company’s car, or wearing your brand of clothes. So while the item is free for the famous person, it’s really an investment on behalf of the company, there were other motives in giving them something for nothing, suddenly it starts to make sense.

That’s not to say that all companies are scheming or plotting when they give things out for free, but the bottom line of a business is to make money. James speaks of this mindset in our epistle lesson, saying that when we do anything it should be without any form of distinction or showing of partiality. The rich and the poor are the same in the eyes of a Christian, no one gets preferential treatment based on their fame or how much money they have. This is a response and evidence of the faith in our hearts, this also is following the example of Jesus Christ.

We see in the life of Jesus a universal, unbiased care for all who come to him. Rich and poor. Zacchaeus, the tax collector, one with an abundance of money, gets the honor of hosting Jesus at his own home. Here in our Gospel lesson a deaf man who has a speech impediment, someone who it is safe to say probably didn’t have much money, is personally healed by the Son of God. Jesus loves Jew and Gentile. He meets with the Pharisee, Nicodemus and teaches him the truth of being saved by water and the spirit, new birth language that we tie to our own Baptisms. Jesus came and ate and spoke with Jews. Jesus also came and ate and spoke with Gentiles. Jesus speaks earlier in Mark chapter 7 with a Syrophoenician woman, and Mark states explicitly in verse 26: “Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophoenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.” And while Jesus speaks to this woman plainly and perhaps a bit gruffly, she shows great faith in her understanding of how Jesus truly did come for all. And he heals her daughter. Jesus shows no favoritism, and neither should we. It doesn’t matter their status in life. If the President of the United States were to walk through the doors of Trinity Lutheran Church (Norwalk Lutheran Church) he would have to find a place to sit like everybody else. There wouldn’t be a private service just for him, because God’s house, and God’s Word, and God’s gifts are truly for all people.

That’s the attitude we are called to have by James, it’s the same as by Jesus Christ, it’s the example we are given in the picture of the last day when Jesus separates the sheep and the goats, and makes reference to how the sheep cared for him in his time of need by giving him food and drink and visiting him and providing for him even when the sheep had no idea that when they were serving the least they were serving the greatest. That’s the standard, a perfect service to all. James speaks of the harrowing reality of the Law saying “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” So it’s not just that we serve those who help us get ahead in life, you don’t get points for helping some but not others, we are called to help all, support all, and love all as Christ has helped, supported, and loved all before us in his perfect life and his sacrifice on the cross.

But our sinful self sees even our service exactly as James describes. Something that is done to help us along. After all, the poor can’t help us. The poor can’t pay us back, the poor can’t further our career, the poor can’t do anything for us. So why help them? Why bother? They’ll probably just rip us off and steal what little we have anyway. We lie to ourselves and think that we are justified in not helping them. Even though it’s the rich as James writes who oppress us, and drag us into court, and dishonor our names and blaspheme us. But we can put up with that, after all, we get something here in this life from them. We get a taste of the good life, we can buy our own happiness and one day we’ll be the ones in charge. But the royal law is clear. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And your neighbor is everyone. And even if we were to somehow help 99.9% of the people who are in need even if we show any discrimination against anyone based on anything, even if we slip up even the smallest and tiniest bit, we are guilty of breaking all of the Law of God and deserve the punishment of hell.

Doesn’t seem like the system is set up for us to succeed based on our own works. There are no shortcuts when it comes to salvation and Jesus Christ knew that truth, which meant that the only way that sinful man would be saved was for a perfect substitute to take their place and their punishment, which is exactly what Jesus became. And this is the Savior that you and I have, we see the example in our Gospel lesson. What happens may sound a bit gross, and crazy especially as we’ve been in the midst of a pandemic for so long and we’ve had to adjust to a society where we don’t shake hands or hug other people, let alone what’s going on here in this particular section of Holy Scripture, but put yourself in the shoes of a man who is deaf and can’t speak. Jesus sees this man’s plight and takes him aside so the deaf man knows that Jesus is solely focusing on him. And then instead of just speaking words of healing, as he has done in the past, as just earlier he did for the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter, he puts his hands in ears, spits and then touches this man’s tongue. He looks up to heaven and with a sigh of compassion, an outward sign of his mercy and love of this man, he speaks a word meaning “be opened” and the man is healed.

It may sound disgusting to think of someone sticking their fingers in your ears, it probably hasn’t happened since you were a child and someone was playing a prank on you. And you don’t think of spitting as something that shows affection or care, but instead it’s expelling something bad out of your mouth, but Jesus here is showing how personal he cares for you and loves you. He doesn’t just cut you a check and make amends with something impersonal as money. He doesn’t just hire somebody to come and fix your mess because you are a friend of a friend of a friend. He is personally there with you, touching you where it hurts, healing you with his own hands, knowing your needs, and taking you aside, giving outward signs of his compassion when you can’t hear, he knows you! He knew you before you existed, he knew you and saw you and was with you as you were being knitted together in your mother’s womb, he loves you and cares for you not when you can pay him back, not when you can return something of significance to him, not when you’ve reached a certain level of success or you deserve an audience with the very creator of the world, no he loves you even when you can’t hear him. Even when you can’t speak. Even when sin has clouded you to the point where you can’t hear his words and when you can’t even call for help, he hears you. He’s with you. He loves you.

He shows his care in how He takes weakest among us, and the smallest, and the least significant in the eyes of the world, and the ones who are completely reliant upon others to this place of prominence and clothes them in the very robe of Christ’s righteousness in the waters of Holy Baptism (as we will be blessed to see next week here at Trinity). There is nothing we can offer to God in exchange for the amazing gift of Baptism, we are spiritually disabled from birth. We are born spiritually blind, spiritually dead, spiritually corrupted and dirty and disgusting, and yet God washes us clean. Purified, redeemed, bought back, sanctified, made holy again, no partiality shown, it doesn’t matter who your parents are, or how much money they have, it doesn’t matter what your last name is or how many relatives you’ve had who have come before who have received the same amazing gift. Because God loves the world, and that includes everyone, and so we are given the same responsibility not as something we have to do to stay in the good graces of God but instead the natural response to the faith in our hearts, who have received the amazing gift of salvation and can’t help but show that faith through the things that we do.

We are liars if we say that we have faith and do nothing. James writes, “But someone will say ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works and I will show you my faith by my works.” There is no faith outside of works, for works spring from faith, works are the natural result of saving faith, and works are done in such a way that we don’t even keep track of the works that we do. The good works that we do flow from us like the excitement of a dog who has been cooped up inside all day, waiting to go out for a walk, waiting to see their owner, waiting to get to spend time playing and running and exploring. That’s the relationship our good works have to our faith, we can’t help but do them, it isn’t something that we feel an obligation to do it’s the natural result of our faith.

It’s the blessing we get to be to others, and I challenge all of us to see the responsibility and joy it is to be a blessing to others. We get to be a blessing because of the blessings that are heaped upon us every single day. Remembering our own baptism. Eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Serving the Lord where he has called us in our vocations. Being a light to the entire world here in this place and wherever God calls us. These are just a taste of the blessings we have, and our works flow out of the faith in our hearts as we are a blessing to those around us through Christ who gives us strength.

You have received so many blessings and so many gifts, for free, no strings attached, no partiality. Give thanks and go forth in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.