

THE CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS

Jesus in Disguise

James 1:22—2:7

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/churches-without-walls-jesus-in-disguise/>

The other day I was dressing for a funeral and as I was tying my necktie, I looked in the mirror and saw flecks of blood. Evidently, I had nicked myself shaving. Because I saw that in the mirror, I quickly changed my shirt and finished dressing. Notice this is the same process James mentions in 1:23-25. Hearing and doing (vv. 22-25). James calls us to pure and undefiled religion (1:27), which begins with God as Father. You see, that erases any notion of doing community transformation as a works-righteousness. It is because we have been born into God's family that we serve and seek to see our community changed.

And if God is our Father, we automatically have brothers and sisters. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We are not fully alive until we're lifted from individual concerns to the good of all." How might it affect the way we view the poor, the weak, the castoffs of our culture, if we remember that God is Father? We are all made in God's image.

Now, James says, we must keep ourselves unstained from a world which makes distinctions between rich and poor. In 2:1ff, he tells about a rich person who enters church and is fussed over and shown a place of honor. Then a poor person enters and is treated shabbily. The late Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas was an avid hiker. One day he needed medical attention and walked into a clinic, dressed in hiking clothes, sweaty, disheveled and ordinary looking. The clinic staff was irritated, because it was close to closing time. They were unkind to him...until they knew he was somebody. But then, everybody is somebody in God's eyes!

In 2:3, James asks a very important question. Have we become judges of one another with evil thoughts? How quickly (and incorrectly) we make judgments about another person, based on clothes or other surface matters. Historical documents show that caring for the weak and the outcast was one of the ways the early church distinguished itself in the midst of pagan values. And now, James says, are you going to forfeit that witness to the world? Historians tell us that in the early church there were slaves and their masters alongside one another. Church was the one place in the world that these social, racial and economic distinctions didn't matter.

But there is a deeper truth. James tells us in v. 5 that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. We need the poor! Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized this. He pointed out (in *Sanctorum Communio*) that in the developed world, the church is made up of primarily the middle class while in developing world the church is primarily composed of the poor. And Bonhoeffer asked, "Which church is flourishing?" And if that was true 90 years ago, how much more today! The poet William Blake once wrote, "I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see; I sought my God, but my God eluded me; I sought my neighbor and I found all three."

One of the verses which we often overlook in that famous Psalm 46 ("God is our refuge and strength") is the small but mighty phrase, "God is in the midst of the city" (46:5). Think of it. As

we go out to be the church without walls, we don't bring God. God is already there, among the poor and neglected.

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 25:35-36? "...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Jim Wallis tells the story of an elderly woman in his neighborhood named Mary. She works at the weekly food line, serving warm meals to homeless and needy people. He heard her pray, "Lord, we know that you'll be coming through the line today, so Lord, help us treat you well" [*God's Politics*, p. 217].

Jesus is in our community. He just may be disguised as a homeless person, a hungry person, a person without any knowledge of God's love, a person in need of decent job. "Lord, when we see you, help us to treat you well."