

05/06/12 (2)

“Welcome to My Pew” (James #3)

James 2:1-17; Luke 14:7-11

I. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF MY ASKING EVERYONE TO MOVE TO A DIFFERENT PEW?

A. ***Does it bother you? Do you think, Well, that is just one more thing the interim pastor did that we will not have to worry about doing again? I hope some of you will take advantage of the situation to share a new worship encounter with the people next to you?***

1. The point is to get you to think intentionally about where you always sit.
2. Does it add or distract from your worship if you come into the sanctuary and (God forbid!) someone is sitting in your place?
3. When you visit a church out of town, if there are no ushers to show you to a pew, how then do you choose a place to sit?

[No. 4 below was omitted from my preached sermon for brevity!]

4. *On the final day of my third trip to New Zealand, on a Sunday morning, I asked Ned and Ruth the friends I was staying with there in Henderson, “Take me by the Presbyterian Church. Just leave me here; I will walk home. As I entered the church, an usher at the door greeted me warmly and asked me to sign the guest register. As I entered the sanctuary, I met the guest minister. I found an empty row of chairs to sit in. A few minutes later, an elder approached me, “I noticed that you are sitting by yourself. We do not like for anyone to worship alone in our church. May I sit beside you this morning?” I said I would enjoy that.*

At the start of worship the minister greeted the 3 other visitors by name, but he did not welcome me. However, when he got to the start of his sermon, the visiting pastor announced, “Last year I was interested in arranging a pulpit trade with a Presbyterian pastor in America. There were 3 in the USA listed in our denominational exchange list. The first two were unavailable. I telephoned the third name on the list. “That person I called a year ago was recovering from back surgery. He is in our midst this morning. He has just completed a 3 month trade with a pastor down south in Plimmerton Parish. I would like you all to meet Pastor Dave Schneider from New Mexico, USA.”

After church, while we were having the traditional cup of tea, another member asked me if I needed a ride home, or needed to go anywhere in town. I thanked her for her kindness and I said, “I was quite familiar with Henderson and also the metro area of Auckland. “But there is one thing you might do for me. That hymn we sang this morning: ‘He Came Singing Love,’— I would love to have a copy to take home with me.” “I will put the sheet music in my host family’s mail box by 2:00 this afternoon,” she promised me.

The following Wednesday evening, back in Alamogordo, New Mexico, I went in to the choir practice with the sheet of music. I told our choir about this wonderful hymn by Colin Gibson, and I shared my visit to the church in Henderson. At that point the choir director drew my attention to a banner on the choir room wall. I had never paid much attention to that banner. It had on it the words to “He Came Singing Love.”

B. ***There are certain places in the church that are sacred to us; they hold special memories. There are other places we scarcely notice.***

1. These important spaces often are associated with our family’s long-time presence in the church.

- a. Others may have deeply spiritual meanings, places where we have been touched by the Holy Spirit.
- 2. It is important to honor and recognize these holy places in our lives.
 - a. Carl Dudley, a church sociologist, in his book "Making the Small Church Effective," tells about a widow who returned to worship in a time of personal grief. She arrived late in order to avoid too many friends. Her husband of 40 years had died two months earlier. To her anguish she found "her pew" had been taken over by a young couple who had been attending in her absence. The following Saturday she came to visit her young pastor, Carl Dudley. As a widow she wanted help with what she called her "sin of idolatry." This widow ministered to the pastor and the young couple with their squirming child. She invited them all to sit in the pew with her.

"For 38 years I shared that pew with my husband. I know it is idolatrous, pastor, but I feel God is closer to me there than any where else." The young couple took up "residence" in a pew nearby. They became very close to the older woman.

II. IN THE LETTER OF JAMES, THIS PASTOR IN HIS INTRODUCTION SAYS HE WRITES NOW TO "THE 12 TRIBES IN THE DISPERSION." PRE-DOMINANTLY THESE ARE THE SCATTERED JEWISH CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, FOR WHOM THE "TORAH," THE JEWISH LAW SO FAMILIAR TO JESUS, IS THEIR DIRECTORY FOR WORSHIP.

A. *But now there are some new people coming in to this small church gathering. The new folks are mixing in with this intimate congregation.*

- 1. James provides a few hints about what is going on in the worship service,
 - a. There are one or two hot topics of conversation among the members as they wait there and talk noisily before worship.
- 2. Apparently there are worshipers coming in from the extremes of society...
 - a. the chryso-clac-tylios, or the "gold-fingered" folks, who wear gold rings and are of the equestrian rank, the upper crust of society: the money-lenders and tax-gatherers in the city. If they would join, they might establish the financial security of this fledgling church.
 - (1) Quite a few of these are Gentiles, of Greek backgrounds.
 - b. Also, there are blue-collar people who come in their dirty work clothes, and likewise the poor who are there because they are totally dependent on alms. Will the church give them a hand-out?
 - (1) When I was a kid growing up in northern Iran, I remember going to the down-town church The beggars would greedily stick their fingers through the gate in the wall around the church and plead for 2 or 5-rial coins (a nickel or a dime). My father always had his coin purse with a few coins he would distribute to these people.
 - c. A good thing about our congregation is that we are so small, we will welcome warmly anyone who visits, anyone who asks about joining!
- 3. Please notice something really important here! James is not criticizing those who are coming in to worship from the outside. He is going after the ones who belong in the church, specifically the church ushers, those he calls their judges:
 - a. They have forgotten their Jewish-Christian standards of morality; they have adopted the ways of the worldly society around them.
 - b. These ushers and church judges go after the gold-ringed, well-dressed folks and say, "Sit here please, in these special chairs, which we have reserved for our guests."

- (1) Chairs or benches were uncommon in the first century society. If there were any, they were only for the socialites, the Roman aristocrats.
- c. And to the working class or the beggars— also allowed to come in—the church ushers tell them, “You must stand over here,” or, “You shall sit at my feet.”
- (1) These were words of dismissal, insults. (page 2)
- d. A few women from Russellville, Arkansas, traveled around in Greece for 3 weeks. One of them told me if anyone enters an Orthodox Church today, she will be standing for the entire 2-3 hour “Divine Liturgy.” Only the priests, the choir, have seats. There might be one or two rows of chairs for a few others.
- [pause]**
4. James uses rather strong language here, the diatribe.
- a. Such talk would certainly not be welcome in our worship service!
- b. He says: you all are under the law of freedom in Christ’s glory, but that same law of freedom you are using to show partiality, to play favorites.
- (1) This is the second time James mentions the name of Jesus.
- c. In the Old Covenant Law, you were under the law of neighborly love, and you are obviously not demonstrating that here!
- d. If you ignore the poor—the ones toward whom Jesus showed partiality— then God will use that same law of freedom to judge all of you harshly!
5. One first century document written at the same time as James, “The Testament of Zebulun,” (5:1-3), promises that the Lord returns to you the (very same) mercy you show to others.
- a. Mercy, insists James, is another way of fulfilling the law of love.
6. Dr. Pheme Perkins in his commentary observes that this section in chapter 2 focuses on specific relations between Christians in the church, but it seeks to draw on all venues of life and experience, and to eliminate a second set of completely different attitudes toward outsiders.
- a. Two weeks ago I was at the crowded airport in Denver at 10:00 at night, near the front of a long line at United’s Customer Service. I was sitting on the floor out of the way of everyone else. When an agent learned that I was handicapped because of my leg, she went and got me a chair. She gave just a little beyond the call of duty, but she made my whole evening memorable.
- b. Practice your inclusive love of everyone inside your church family. Only then will you be ready to take it outside your church walls.
- c. A person from the first century A.D. School of Cynics, criticizes in writing a fellow philosopher for his love of luxury
- d. *“But if you were to ask the very man who is straining his lungs and bawling and accusing everybody else: ‘How about yourself and what do you really do, and what in Heaven’s name do you contribute to the world?’ he would say, if he were willing to say what was right and true: ... ‘I shout, go dirty, take cold baths, walk about barefoot in winter, and...carp at everything others do. If some rich man or other has made an extravagant outlay on a dinner or keeps a mistress, I make it my affair and get hot about it; but if one of my friends or associates is ill abed and needs relief and attendance, I ignore it.”*

- e. Those Cynics from early Greek society detached themselves from normal social relationships. They fled no moral concern, but then they would butt into everyone's affairs. Early Christians went beyond the language of helping others. They began to speak of one another as "my brother" and my sister." They obligated themselves to one another in Christ. These Christians shared all things in common (Acts 2). They became family with no distinctions, and that is how the first church grew so miraculously. Their spaces and their time were holy because their lives touched each other closely. (page 3)
- f. One Sunday a session member in our church noticed a homeless transient come in at noon and ask for a bus ticket. The elder invited the visitor to sit beside himself and his wife at our church covered-dish luncheon. And after that he personally took the outsider down to the bus depot. That day I was taught a lesson.

III. HOW WOULD YOU OR I IDENTIFY HOLY SPACE?

A. ***Most theologians , I think, will agree with Carl Dudley:***

1. It is where you "have a sense of God in a place that is precious" to you,
 - a. where God's time in the Risen Christ has intersected your time and space at a specific moment,
 - b. there has been some kind of spiritual transformation.
 - c. We call that a KAIROS (kai-ros) event or moment;
2. You want to share this place physically and spiritually with others--you need to share it, not keep it private. Holy spaces are for sharing.
3. It is where there has been healing, love;
 - a. It touches those who care, helps them becoming caring persons,
 - b. It fills us with hope.
 - c. A poor beggar, a blue collar worker, someone who wanders in, a judge, an elected official, can touch your life and for a few moments you truly feel as one--one church, one Lord, one faith.
4. Dudley has written another book that I love, with a timely title, "Where Have All the People Gone?"
 - a. I think some people leave a church because there has not been a holy place for them. Maybe we have not gifted them with such an experience.
5. Carl Dudley quotes Dr. Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist and Christian therapist from a half-century ago, "The giving of a place to those who have none seems to me to be one way of defining our vocation as healers of persons... one becomes a person only if one has a place."
6. Paul Tournier also observes that the giving of a holy place, a home where a Christian belongs, is essential for meaningful life, and is a gift we may share or give to others, especially the poor and hungry.
 - a. To belong is something today's generation says they genuinely want.
 - b. It also has meaning for those in a women's shelter, for street kids, for those traveling across the country looking for home and family from which they have become alienated.
 - b. We may invite them to join us in our worship and at the Lord's Table. We may invite them to sit down at a church meal. That person may be an angel in disguise bringing healing to us, or mercy, and not even know it.

- c. Would a homeless person ever be able, want to belong to our church?
- 7. If you did move to a new pew today, after the service talk with your "new neighbors." At the coffee hour find a friend; is there a sacred place for you here in this building you feel comfortable talking about? Would you be willing to invite your neighbor to share its story with you, how it has changed you..?
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 - a. By so doing, each one of you will be enriched.
 - b. For a few this may be a way to find closure or healing.

B. ***In James such a place must always be within the context of the law of love of neighbor, as you both become doers of the Word.***

- 1. When we come into Christ's house, let remember how we chose our space.
 - a. Where we sit affirms and honors others as fellow children of God.
 - b. If we exclude another, we in fact may be excluding ourselves.
- 2. And remember that religion which is pure and undefiled is to welcome and to care for the widow and the orphan and to ask them to sit in the best places. We will not change their status in God's eyes, but we might just change how God views you and me.
 - a. (By the way, our professional church organist two years ago offered to trade place with me, but I said, "No." (I would not dare touch a single key on our fine 12-rank pipe organ!)

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...Now may all of God's beautiful people say, "Amen."

