

“Have a Seat”

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¹My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ... ¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:1-10, 14-17)

The last line of this passage has a way of pushing itself to the front of the line. It almost demands a theological debate. No doubt, many a preacher confronting this scripture this morning will happily give in to that demand, perhaps in an effort to reconcile the seeming contradiction between the bold assertion of Paul that works can never save us, and the dire warning of James that that faith without works is dead. Many of those sermons will be excellent, but I want to focus instead this morning on the greater number of words in this text that boldly confront a very different, but no less pushy, demand.

Back in early June of 1991, right after graduating from college, I was lucky enough to land a job with the majority staff of the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary. One of the primary responsibilities of that committee is the confirmation of federal judges, but at that time their attention was focused on major piece of crime legislation. They didn't need me to start until that crime bill was complete, so they said I should wait and report for duty after the July 4th holiday. Little did I know that, just a week before I began my new job, Justice Thurgood Marshall would announce his retirement from the U.S. Supreme Court and the first President Bush would quickly nominate Clarence Thomas to fill that historic seat. In the whirlwind that ensued, every staff member was conscripted into the confirmation process in one way or another, which is how I found myself holding the clipboard outside of the big wooden doors of the Russell Caucus Room one evening.

If you have ever been entrusted with a clipboard at a door, you know what a heady feeling that can be. That evening, the single piece of paper on my clipboard had written upon it the list of persons scheduled to testify before the committee in that late session. Bear in mind, this was not the frenetic, emotionally-charged second phase of the hearing that featured Anita Hill's explosive testimony; it was the much more boring initial phase. But that did not stop the power from going to my head a bit. After all, I held great power in my inexperienced, young adult hands. If someone was on the list, I would open the door



and say “Have a seat in the front row.” But if they were not on the list, and the room was full, it was up to me to say, “Please stand over there. You will have to wait.” I was, it would seem, the last line of defense between civic order and peace on the one hand and lawless chaos on the other.

As the hours waned on, things got pretty slow at the door. The witnesses were all inside and accounted for, and no one else came and went. The only sound echoing down the marble hallways was the shuffling of my own loafers. But then, all of a sudden, my moment of triumph was before me. I heard the clicking of her shoes long before she came into view. When she came around the corner, I beheld a woman in her forties. Her suit was elegant but not too formal. She had a relaxed air about her. She had a familiar look about her, although I could not place it. But none of that mattered. I was ready for anything, and this was my moment.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” I said. “The room is full. I’m going to have to ask you to wait here until someone comes out.”

She was disappointed but she understood. She stepped patiently to the side to wait. And I, the man with the clipboard, had kept the world safe for democracy, at least for one more night.

This brings us to the epistle of James, and the story of how the doors of the church were being guarded in his day. The writer had observed a disturbing trend – namely, that wealthy persons wearing gold rings and fine clothes were being given preferential treatment. When poorer people in dingier clothes asked to be let in, they were somewhat rudely told to “Stand over there” or “Sit on the floor if you want.” But when the rich asked for entry, they were immediately ushered in with polite deference and invited to “Have a seat here, please.”

The strong word the epistle uses for this ethical distinction is “favoritism” or “partiality.” The Greek verb does not describe an action that is honorable or good. It is a fault, a sense of being two-faced and internally divided in a negative way.¹ The behavior that James was seeing was harmful, importing worldly distinctions into the body of Christ that was supposed to operate a different way.

This is just one of the places where the New Testament describes what can be described, and has been described, as the radical egalitarianism of the body of Christ. The church is meant to be a place where distinctions are erased and equality is assumed. As Paul famously said, in Christ “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”² That ideal, however, has mostly been an aspiration. Only very rarely is true egalitarianism practiced and equality attained. Worldly distinctions have a way of creeping in, often bringing with them the assumption that some people are more important than others. For example, an elder in the church I served before this one would sometimes use the term “key families” in sensitive discussions. It never sat well with me, because he was so unabashedly embracing the idea that James found so offensive – the idea that certain people, certain families, should be favored with more sway, power, status, and importance. While it is hard for us to

¹ Aaron Iutti, “Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4 ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009, pp. 39, 41.

² Galatians 3:28.

move away from all favoritism, and while we still see it often and rarely live up to our call to egalitarianism, it should be a goal that we pursue in word, thought, and deed – the idea that here – if nowhere else, here – we are all deemed equal.

A great example of someone who tried valiantly in this regard was Pope John the 23rd, the pontiff who convened the ground-breaking council that is known today as Vatican II. While he did not live to see that council through to completion, it arrived at conclusions he almost assuredly would have favored. One of them was an appreciation of equality in the church. In 1961, John the 23rd pointed the Catholic church toward a goal that he described as follows: "to make accessible the goods and services for a better life to as many persons as possible; either to eliminate or hold within bounds the inequalities that exist between different sectors of the economy; to balance properly any increase in output with advances in services provided to citizens, especially by public authority."³ In short, the pope wanted us to remedy economic inequities, to balance economic imbalances, to right economic wrongs, all in the name of the church of Jesus Christ.

The need to continued vigilance in these matters was made clear to us this past week, when we had our own adventure with Tropical Storm Ida. After wreaking terrible havoc on the Gulf Coast, Ida reserved enough power to give one last wallop on her way out. Stephanie and I had gone into the city to attend the convocation of Molly's class, one that COVID had managed to cancel last year. Despite the wind and the rain, the ceremony went ahead as planned. We decided to take a taxi to Grand Central station to save some time, which we realized was a stroke of grace given the crazy footage we saw later of flooded subway passages throughout the city. We boarded our train with some time to spare, but as the departure time came and went, we were informed that all trains were being held in Grand Central because of a tree that had fallen on the tracks. Then the messages started talking trees and flooding. Hours passed, no trains were moving. More and more people bailed out and found an Uber or other lift home. Most of us just stayed put, hoping things would clear. At about one o'clock in the morning, Metro North moved those of us who were left to a diesel train, which we took as a hopeful sign. But that train didn't move either. Finally, at about 5:15 a.m., MTA came over the loudspeaker essentially saying, "We don't know what else to say. We have no timetable for when the tracks will be open again. We strongly encourage you to find another way home."

As Stephanie and I made our bleary-eyed walk out to 42nd Street, we noticed first that a great many people were still not leaving the train. Then, out in the grand hall of the station, we saw that many chose to find a spot on the floor to curl up and keep waiting. It was not, in any sense, a scene of equality. It only served to highlight the inequality that some of us were lucky enough to have options, while so many others were not. We may not have wanted to pay for an Uber, but we could do so if it came down to it. Others had spent what they had to spend on a train ticket, and the idea that they would now pay ten times that amount to get home was a pipe dream. Their only option, their only choice, was to wait and hope.

And then there was the scene yesterday at St. Thomas Church. When I walked in, I saw a cornucopia of blessings spread out around the Fellowship Hall. People of this church

³ Pope John XXIII in *Mater et magistra* #79, cited by Drew Christiansen, "On Relative Equality: Catholic Egalitarianism After Vatican II," *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1984), p. 652.

joined so many others in our community had come together to donate clothing, supplies, and food to people in our community who had been displaced by the flood. And what I noticed was that it was almost impossible to look out over that room and know which people were helping, and which people who were getting help. There was plenty to go around, and plenty of joy in spreading it around. This is what I have to imagine that James had in mind when he urged Christians to pursue a radial egalitarianism – an impartiality that favors everyone, and looks out for everyone. Here was a group working to do just what Pope John the 23rd thought we should do -- to make goods and services available to as many persons as possible... to try and remedy inequalities that are painful or wrong... and do our best to balance things out in the name of the God who wants the best for all people. In that room there were no “key families;” there were just families... families being brought together into the one family of God.

Flash back thirty years to the scene outside of the Russell Caucus Room on Capitol Hill, where representative democracy was being practiced on one side of the big wooden doors while old-school street justice was being nobly delivered on the other side by a humble hero and his mighty clipboard. The somewhat awkward silence was soon broken by more marble-echoed footsteps coming toward us. These footsteps were much quicker and heavier... oddly heavier... that is, until I realized who it was coming around the corner. As the Administrative Assistant for the most powerful senator on the committee, she more than filled those big shoes. She talked fast and moved fast and everybody knew that, if you were going to get in her way, you better brace for impact.

She took a quick, unimpressed look at me, and then a much longer and much more compassionate look at the woman – or, I should say, the security threat that I had diffused just a few moments ago. And then, with just a word, the most powerful person on Ted Kennedy’s staff solved the mystery that I had been trying so hard to figure out.

“Caroline,” she said, “what are you doing standing out here?”

Yes, the diminutive man with his crumpled blue blazer and clipboard had just instructed Caroline Kennedy to stand aside, because there was simply no room for her in the storied, gilded hearing room that would later be renamed in honor of her family. As embarrassed as I was, the thing I remember most about that encounter was how gracious Caroline Kennedy was about the whole thing. She never said, “Do you know who I am?” She never uttered a cross word, mumbled under her breath, or even gave me an annoyed glare. She had no intention of using her wealth or her status to gain a seat in the assembly. She was content to wait – to follow the same rules as everyone else.

The thing is, if I had known it was Caroline Kennedy, I’m pretty sure I would have done exactly what the book of James warns us not to do. I would have played favorites. I would have shown partiality. Even after telling well-meaning people all day to “stand aside” or “come back later,” I totally would have opened the door, guided her in, and said with a smile, *“Have a seat here... please.”*

It is not something that always comes naturally – to be a community that is radically egalitarian... to be a fellowship that seeks not to reinforce favoritism, but erase it... to be a church that sees neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, but only people loved equally by God in heaven. But it is helpful to remember, when we find ourselves holding the proverbial clipboard... when we are in a position to be welcoming or not welcoming... when we catch ourselves thinking in terms of insiders and outsiders... that in the kingdom of God

every person is an equally valued member of the household of God... and to God, in the end, every family is a key family.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. ***Amen.***