

Sermon: The Partiality of the Impartial God

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Sep. 8, 2024)

Philip Yancey, a contemporary American writer, contributing to the Christian Century magazine on the subject of signs of a healthy church, recounted a conversation he had with an Indian pastor. The pastor said to Yancey, “Most of what happens in Christian churches, including even the miracles, can be duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and women of different castes, races, and social groups. That’s the real miracle.”

It is an interesting observation from someone who understands the caste system in India. Someone who has first hand knowledge and first hand experience on the harm that a rigid caste or class system could have on an individual and a societal level. Someone who appreciates the message of the Gospel, and how it could be empowering and transformative for those on the lower or the lowest caste.

For indeed, as the Apostle Paul boldly proclaims in Galatians 3:28, “*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.*” In Christ, the walls that separate humanity from one another come tumbling down, as however ineptly faithful Christians strive to do. When a congregation gathers to worship, we are all one in Christ, for we know, and are taught by the apostles, and even by Christ himself, that ‘*God shows no partiality*’ (Romans 2:11, Acts 10:34)

God is impartial to the three major divisions of Apostle Paul’s time, in the first century Mediterranean / Middle-East, of Jew or Greek, of slave or free, of male or female. I don’t want to belittle those divisions, as humanity and faithful Christians alike did have to grapple with the challenges of the Holocaust, the Emancipation, and the Universal Suffrage in the most recent century. But thanks be to God, we seem to have overcome, however ineptly, as those divisions are no longer our primary concerns.

Paul did leave out one particular division of his time, and James picked it up in his Epistle, a division that has been a concern for humanity, ever since the beginning of history until now. I am referring to wealth; more specifically the unequal distribution of wealth.

In the second chapter of his Epistle, James starts with, “*My brothers and sisters, do not claim the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory while*

showing partiality.” (James 2:1) He then goes on to describe a hypothetical situation in verse 2-3, “*For 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, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here in a good place, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit by my footstool,”* It is a situation that is, might I add, sadly, all too believable. For those of us who have been in church long enough, we are all too familiar with such a reality, however much we wish to mask it.

The famed preaching professor and author Thomas G. Long, once shared a story of a friend of his, who decided to put the passage of James to the test. A well-respected leader in her congregation, she chose to appear at her church one Sunday in the guise of a homeless person. Though she was by no means a “minks and gold rings” kind of woman, she took a great deal of effort, with theatrical makeup and thrift-store clothing, and transformed herself into a person whose appearance showed the ravages of the street. Her experience at her own church was remarkable, quite informative.

Church friends who would normally have greeted her cheerily in the hallway, turned their heads and would not make eye contact. When she was not being ignored, she was glared at, and, as she made her way toward the worship space, she could sense the ushers tensing for a possible confrontation. They seated her as far way from others as possible. When she finally revealed who she really was during the service, astonishment turned rapidly to embarrassment, and finally to many apologies after the service. Tom Long then offered a pointed critique in accordance with the Epistle of James, this kind of partiality is sin, pure and simple.

Sadly, showing deference, or favouritism in a congregation, to those who are seeming rich or well-to-do is a behaviour that is very much alive and well today. Now I don't want to be overtly critical, for I do understand most churches are dealing with declining membership and tightening budget. I can easily and readily imagine if a rich person shows up at a congregation, and is ready to connect with and contribute to the church, what might church leaders be thinking: which overdue repairs could now be taken care of; which programs previously unattainable could now be available; which ministries could now be explored; what additional staff could now be hired. A rich person represents many things: opportunity,

respect, resources, connections, even power. And all of these can be very useful for the running of a congregation...and look how welcoming we are! We've just received this person with open arms. James tells us that we must live out our faith with good works, and well, it takes money to do good works.

Look, it's just a caricature. I get it. I have no doubt most Christians are good people, well meaning. We want to be faithful, blessing the world with the peace of Christ, and bringing hope to the hopeless. We want to do less on developing budgets and more on developing our walk with God. We want to proclaim God's abundance to a hungry and thirsty world, but we feel overwhelmed by the sheer scale of it, and overwhelmed by our own scarcity. We are reminded, as in Proverbs 22:2, "The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all." For indeed, we are all made in the image of God, for richer or poorer.

Showing partiality to the rich, according to James, is sin. But is James really advocating for stance of neutral impartiality, of neither rich or poor? Well, not really. Looking closely at this passage, one gets the sense that James is actually trying his best to advocate the church to display partiality, not in the way the worlds does, but the kind of partiality that God expresses.

Through a rhetorical question James asks in verse 5, "*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?*" As Tom Long puts it, "While the American image of justice is a blindfolded woman holding balance scales, the biblical image is instead a God who sees everything and set things right.

God is not impartial; God chooses the weak and establishes justice. We see this partiality of God throughout the Bible, by hearing the cries of those poor and oppressed, by God's overt concerns for orphans and widows, the establishment of Jubilee to cancel economical inequities, the teaching of Jesus to care of the 'least of these', just to name a few. And who can forget these words of the Lord that, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!" (Matthew 19:24)

God is not impartial. In fact, God has consistently shown partiality for the poor, the weak, and the lowly. Instead of pushing them down or driving them away, as the world often does, God has invites them and transforms them into the royal children of God. "*Blesses are the poor in spirit, (or*

simply the poor), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3, Luke 6:20)

Wealth on earth is relative and ever so fleeting. The challenge for us as individuals and as the community of faith is how we use this wealth to bless, not to oppress. For in God’s view, and hopefully in the upside down world of the Christian Church, we are all starting off as poor, with a potential to become rich in faith.

Allow me to share with you a precious moment I witnessed during one of the Alpha course hosted by St. Giles in the Spring of this year. Alpha is an evangelical curriculum, first developed by the Anglican Church in the 1970’s, and now is being used across denominations, worldwide. Typically it involves weekly gatherings, over thirteen weeks, of shared meals, watching video, and discussion about faith. It is evangelism 101 where participants learn (or re-learn) about who God is, why Christ came, how the Holy Spirits gathered and empowers the Church.

I believe it was the first time that St. Giles has ever hosted Alpha, and the Session (including myself) prayed and discerned about this ministry for a number of months before we decided to take the plunge. Thanks to a dedicated team of coworkers, of Dorthy, Kate, Mary, Rob, Isaac, Nick, and Stan, I think we pulled it off quite nicely. We weren’t sure at first who would come, but people did, about fifteen of them the first week, a good mixture of St. Giles’ people and newcomers, and it stay in that range throughout.

Towards the end of the curriculum (I think it might’ve been the second last week), Marc walked into Alpha from the street. Marc is a short fellow, French Canadian, with a disheveled and often a dazed look. He is a regular participant of AA groups, hosted by St. Giles, and he is known to walk into St. Giles’ events before. I recall a few times when Marc walked into our Session meeting, I had to politely ask him to leave, as Session meetings are closed meetings, not open to the public. But this time when Marc walked into Alpha, there was no reason to refuse him. He took a seat, stayed and participated in the discussion, and was welcomed by others. He was actually quite open to talk about faith, and engaged in the materials at hand.

But towards the end of the meeting, he got into a coughing fit and it wouldn’t stop. Mucus and spits started to come out of him—it was a mess. Couple of the participants stood up and walked out right away. I don’t blame them. In this post Covid recovery, we are still quite leery of viral/

bacterial transmission, and it is wise to be guarded of one's personal space.

However, I saw others rushing to care for Marc. Nick got him a glass of water, Tim got paper towel for him, someone brought out the mop to wipe the floor, someone else stayed by his side and comforted him. Somehow, the coughing stopped. Marc thanked us and walked out of the meeting, still dishevelled and dazed. He did not come back to Alpha the following week, but I am sure he will walk back into St. Giles some other time.

It was not that big of a deal, just another ordinary event in the life of this congregation. However, it is a reminder to me and hopefully to us, of the economy of God's grace. In the Kingdom of God, the very ones for whom the world has little regard, or have rejected, have become the guests of honor in the household of God.

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