

We all have experienced situations we are comfortable with and those we aren't. We have watched others struggle in the same way. Sometimes such discomfort comes from our conscience reminding us we are making a bad choice. Other times we simply are reminded that doing the right thing isn't always easy or understood by others.

When Abby was little, we were at Coney Dog for a Saturday lunch date. As we drove into the parking lot, we had noticed a man on the corner asking for money. While we were eating, we noticed someone bring him in and buy him some food for lunch. As he was paying for the street person's food, I overheard the man tell the beggar he needed to give his life to Jesus and find a job.

The street guy said, *"I'm a believer,"* but the man didn't appear to be in a listening mode. He handed him a small pamphlet and told him to ready it, finishing with, *"I am too busy to eat with you, but don't forget to give your life to Jesus and get a job."*

There is no doubt this was a generous gift to feed a hungry man and witness faith in Jesus. However, I would imagine this man would be surprised by what others witnessed in this encounter.

As I watched this scenario play out, two competing thoughts struck me. I was embarrassed as I never considered offering to buy this man a meal and was humbled by such a loving gesture from someone else. On the other hand, when I heard his sales pitch for Jesus, I wasn't sure if his concern was genuine, or he was acting out of some sort of obligation. For when the shabbily dressed man said, *"I am a believer,"* the host seemed to ignore that comment and continued with his assumption that if this man were a good Christian, he wouldn't be down and out and begging on the street.

That caused me to consider another question. I wonder what others see in me by my words and actions. In his Epistle, James was writing to brand new Christians who weren't treating each other fairly. The rich and important members sat in the best seats and made sure they went through the potluck line first and filled their plates to overflowing. The shabbily clothed poorer Christians had to sit outside and could only join in worship when the potluck was over. They were invited to worship but not to eat. James asked, "How can you say you have faith if this is how you act?"

We all believe we are saved by faith. James reminds us that faith is more than knowledge but a call to action. It is not memorizing the right answers but responding with the same servant love that changed us. Faith which does not react or respond to real life situations is not faithful living. To celebrate God's favoring of me, why would I not share even the crumbs of that favor in every opportunity that God blesses me with?

Anytime we play favorites there is judgment— separation, barriers, winners, and losers. There was reason God chose such an insignificant nation as Israel, or fishermen for disciples, or Gentiles to be touched by his love. He made it obvious that God has no favorites and loves each the same. Having been embraced by that same love, shouldn't we learn to be more comfortable sharing that love with others?

My great grandparents came to this nation as immigrants, not speaking the language. With

their heavy German accents and lack of expensive clothing, I am sure they confronted the reality that some saw them as poor, shabbily dressed, and not like everyone else. And how do we do today, all of us who are former immigrants and outsiders? How do we do with guests at Zion, where each of us were once a visitor and a stranger? How do we do in our neighborhoods, or at work, or on vacation when we know the “secret handshake” but are put off by those who don’t?

Anytime we favor certain people, by default we also label others as disfavored. When anyone is given first place, automatically the tag of “last place” is placed on someone else. It makes no difference whether it is a pickup game of baseball, girls deciding who will come to their party, or politicians pandering to whichever group will provide the most votes. James said, “If you show favoritism to anyone (or anything) is that not more a question of faith rather than just poor judgment?”

In our Gospel, Mark shares a wonderful encounter as an outsider (an alien) who asked Jesus to heal her daughter from demonic possession. A first response might have been, “so what, she’s “not one of us!” Jesus knew what they were thinking and shared the words that had yet to escape from their lips: *“Why should children’s food be fed to the dogs?”* Or, in other words, *“you aren’t one of this group’s favored ones, why should I waste time with you?”* Such a response from Jesus seemed strange, but he was simply voicing the standard reaction of his audience to foreigners in their midst.

Her response revealed the power of her faith. She said *“I don’t care what anyone thinks of me, I will ask for healing love for my gift of a child who is suffering. I know that even a crumb from your hand is all that is needed for her healing.”* How difficult it must have been for this woman to ignore humiliation and instead lift her head high in faith. Jesus, in turn, lifted her up so that we would understand faith, and the reality that God’s love sees ALL as favored ones. This is more than just talk about people.

How often do we play favorites with wealth, or time, or opportunity? Faith calls us to understand that all things in our lives are gifts “favored by God” and “blessings to be shared?” And so, a person who has been overwhelmed by grief becomes blessed with a powerful awareness of how emptiness can be filled – and even such loss can become a gift that can bless others. One who has lost a job becomes one who can teach others not to take the gift of work for granted.

When, instead, we judge and play favorites, we misuse gifts of God. James would ask, *“Where is your faith?”* Gifts given are given to be shared, and even those judged to be poor are created and gifted by God. He does not say, “Do good stuff so that God will love you or others will think you are pretty special.” He is simply asking, “What did Jesus ever hold back from you?” Did Jesus ever say, “My life is too valuable to share? Did he suggest his reputation, comfort level, time, or feelings were more important than those of others? If I remember correctly, he surrendered ALL that he had out of love for us! That is the Jesus of the Gospels and the Jesus in our midst today!

If faith is the core of my life, then why would I not conform my comfort level to the level of my faith. That is what James meant by *“faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead (2:17.)* Wow! In other words, *Faith brings lavish gifts to be shared. So, walk the talk.*

James observed how people at church treated each other. Jesus encountered a foreign woman

with a shabbily dressed daughter to make same point. Whether it is a stranger or someone who has embarrassed or disappointed us, we all struggle in the same way when called to engage in servant love with someone who makes us feel uncomfortable.

How can I find it in me not to play favorites but to flavor all with the gift that faith brings? “Love God, love neighbor” leaves no wiggle room, and Jesus had powerful ways for reminding that we have more neighbors than we sometimes admit.

Sometimes faith creates uncomfortable living, but that is simply a reminder that God’s way is different from the way of the world. Anytime such living makes us feel a little uncomfortable, maybe we should wonder about the comfort level of a cross or tomb?

Because God has favored us with such a love, how can we do any less? Even the crumbs from our tables are blessings to be shared! And like water turned to wine, even our lives are miracles to be shared! It is often a difficult step to take, but nowhere as difficult as Jesus’ journey to the cross for you and me.