

We all have people and situations we are comfortable with and those we aren't, and watch others react in similar fashion. Sometimes such discomfort comes from our conscience reminding us we are making a bad choice. Other times we simply are reminding that doing the "right thing" isn't always the easy thing to do.

When Abby was little, we were at Coney Dog for a Saturday lunch date. A man brought in a "street person," and bought him a couple hot dogs. I overheard him tell the guy 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 finished with, "*I am too busy to eat with you, but don't forget to give your life to Jesus and get a job.*"

I imagine he felt that he was doing a good thing by feeding and witnessing his faith. But I am certain he would have been surprised by what others witnessed in this encounter. As I watched this scenario play out, two competing thoughts struck me: On the one hand, I doubt if I would have offered this street person a meal, and felt humbled by such a loving gesture. 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. "*What do others see in me, from me, by me?*" We heard the reading from James, who was dealing with young Christians who weren't treating each other fairly. The rich sat in the best seats and got good food at their potlucks, while the shabbily clothed poorer Christians had to sit outside and could only join in worship when the potluck was over. James asked, "*How can you say you have faith if this is how you act?*" We all believe we are saved by faith – James wants us to remember that we are called then to respond with faith. In other words, I celebrate God's favoring of me, by sharing the crumbs of that favor in every way and 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. 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, and undoubtedly were seen by some as poor, shabbily dressed, and "not like us." 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!" And Jesus mirrored their thoughts with his words, "*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?*" 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? My reputation? My comfort level? My time? My feelings? 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 I must 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 “dirty” daughter to make same point. I struggle with what I am called to do when there is something about someone else that makes me feel uncomfortable. In other words, 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!