

In the Mishnah – the written recording of the oral law of the prophets – we read of a rabbi asking questions to his disciples. He asks, "When do we know that light has appeared out of darkness?"

One student answered, "When we can tell the difference between a dog and a lamb?"

"No," said the rabbi.

Another student answered, "When we can tell the difference between a palm tree and a fig tree?"

"No," said the rabbi.

"When then, do we know?" the disciples asked their teacher.

"We know that light has appeared out of darkness when someone can look in the face of any human being and see the face of a sister or brother." ¹

James begins our scripture passage today with a hypothetical situation.

My dear friends, don't let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith. If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him...An interesting scenario!

When I was pastoring at North Star Mennonite Church in Drake, SK, we actually had an experience like this one Sunday morning. The Sunday right before Christmas we were joined by a little angel – 9-year-old Max.

Max was a delight – you could say. I always came into the sanctuary a little before the service. Max – who had been sitting in the back – came to the front where I sat and sat right down next to me and started to talk and pepper me with questions – all during the hymns and prayers and reading of the scripture. He did the same for Rosella who was telling the children's story – it was tough to do what was planned because of all the questions. Why were the candles lit? Why did we sing songs? Why were there only white lights on the Christmas tree? What did that big "t" behind the choir loft stand for? Who was Jesus? Would there be lunch after church?

I was NOT really ready to preach when the time came for me to do so. And when I got up to the pulpit, there was Max – he had come up with me – and then EVERYONE was distracted by Max.

I keep thinking over and over in my head – what we could have done differently? I almost weep when I think that I missed this really important "cue" that could have been pivotal in Max's and our congregation's faith life.

As it were – I do not think that all was lost. The congregation's love did show through. Esther, the church custodian and local school-bus driver stood up and escorted him downstairs to get a drink from the kitchen. Gayle, an extraordinary child-magnet read him a book and brought him up to the nursery where he could ask questions, and she could answer them without disturbing others. After the service Herman drove him the block and a half home – as he had come to church with no jacket nor socks and it was -13F.

¹ Jones, Timothy K. *The Spiritual Formation Bible: Growing in Intimacy with God through Scripture: New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, p. 1605. 1999.

Max was the same age as some of our little ones here but had no experience with the church – none at all – and had no concept of sitting still. If we had a choice, would we welcome him back? To sit in the front row?

James 2 from the Message Interpretation:

My dear friends, don't let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith.

If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit,

"Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!"

and either ignore the street person or say,

"Better sit here in the back row,"

haven't you segregated God's children and proved that you are judges who can't be trusted?

Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? He chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens,

with full rights and privileges.

This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God.

And here you are abusing these same citizens!

Isn't it the high and mighty who exploit you, who use the courts to rob you blind? Aren't they the ones who scorn the new name—"Christian"—used in your baptisms?

You do well when you complete the Royal Rule of the Scriptures:

"Love others as you love yourself."

But if you play up to these so-called important people, you go against the Rule and stand convicted by it. You can't pick and choose in these things, specializing in keeping one or two things in God's law and ignoring others.

Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it?

For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say,

"Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!"

and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you?

Isn't it obvious that faith without works is dead?

In our scripture passage today, James is talking about more than clothing. His hypothetical situation speaks of partiality toward certain folks as opposed to others. Do we treat someone with more respect; extend them more welcome if they appear to have it more "together" in this world? James bluntly asks whether we show more hospitality toward these folks. That's an uncomfortable question, isn't it? In his simple and direct way James forces us to decide.

James speaks to us about the upside-down kingdom – that which is contrary to what the world envisions. He says, "*Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? He chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges.*"

God has a preferential option for the poor. This statement refers to a trend throughout the Bible, of priority being given to the well-being of the poor and powerless of society in the teachings and

commands of Yahweh God through the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and the teachings of Jesus.² God has a special love for those who know that they don't have it all together. What about us? Do we seek out and find and befriend those in need?

Can we be ok with just enough – or are we picky and have to have everything – including our worship – to be “just so” to be happy? Can we see with God's eyes – the treasure that others are when others see only poverty? Can we befriend the homeless?

What about a heart for those who have little faith or little knowledge of what it means to be “church” as we see it – or even for those who don't know what it means to be Mennonite?

Just like a healthy marriage, a healthy congregation requires communication, commitment and conflict resolution skills.

Flexibility – being able to “roll with the punches” – using a boxing term – comes with the decision to remain loyal to the purpose – it comes with the decision to find the best in each situation and allow it to blossom. It means being open to what the Spirit is telling us and not being ashamed to act on that nudging.

The Spirit has continued to nudge me to reevaluate how I respond to situations that make me feel uncomfortable and, I believe, the Spirit nudges in the Max account as well. I keep running scenario after scenario in my mind. What could we have done differently? What would I do next time something like this happened?

I see it in my head so clearly...I would step away from the pulpit. I would invite Max and all the children to come to the front. I would sit down on the steps, and I'd tell them stories about Jesus welcoming the children. About Jesus calming the storm, about Jesus' healing and raising little ones to life. I'd tell Max that I love God because of all this and much more. Then I'd give the mic to someone else, and they'd share a favourite story and maybe answer a few questions – and they'd say why they love God... And it would go on and on. At the end, the whole congregation gathered would realize that the stories shared are the basis for faith and for life together.

We'd learn about God through these stories, we'd learn about love and life and the Spirit through these stories. We'd remember, from these stories, how to live faithful lives. We'd remember that we are loved! We'd remember things and feelings and inspiration long forgotten.

Telling our faith stories where there are hypothetical bears and snakes and wolves and lions...this scary situation – becomes transformed.

For then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;

² “Option for the Poor.” Wikipedia, August 7, 2024.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Option_for_the_poor#:~:text=The%20%22preferential%20option%20for%20the,prophets%20and%20other%20righteous%20people.

And a little child (with his hand in the snake's nest) shall lead them.

Hypothetical situations give way to real people. How we welcome people matters to the ones who are welcomed and to the welcomers. It's not a case of learning the latest method of evangelism. It's not a case of demanding from yourself something that you are physically unable to do. It's simply recognizing in a stranger someone who is a sister or brother and reaching out to them with the love of Jesus.

Are we willing, I'm mean really willing to welcome others with the honour that belongs to everyone?

How do we share our story to the Maxes of the world? How do we tell them that we're like them – still learning? How do we share with them our faith – in a way that is real and tangible to a child's understanding? Or, what if we have guests that did not grow up in a Mennonite church – or any church for that matter? Or, what if there are people that watch us online, or even attend, and question their faith? Or, what if we've forgotten how to pass on our faith?

We can learn about God from each other. We are not excluded from God's love because of our sinful nature, because of our poverty or excessive wealth. God loves the little children and the senior citizens. The Old, the young and the middle aged. God loves our questions and our doubts – our troubles and our joys. God loves that we wrestle with these hard texts and that we do it together.