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Living Hope Lutheran Church, Midlothian, VA
“Love looks to give”
Text: James 2:1-13
Pentecost 15 – 9/3/2010

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (1 Timothy 1:2)

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here's a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵ Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶ But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

Dear brothers and sisters,

Julie Andrews sang a famous song about raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens, brown paper packages tied up with string—they made up just part of her list of favorite things. Why did she prefer raindrops on roses to sharp thorns on roses and whiskers on kittens more than fleas on kittens? It's for the same reason you have a favorite food and a favorite getaway and a favorite TV show. Our favorite things are those that bring us the most happiness. And there's nothing wrong with that. To identify things that add enjoyment to your day and a smile to your face isn't the sinful kind of favoritism God warns about here. Even when it comes to people, there's nothing wrong with identifying those whose company you especially enjoy and with whom you get along especially well. All such examples pertain to what and whom we *like*, and this sinful favoritism isn't at all about whom you like. It's about whom you love.

Liking and loving are two completely different things. *Liking* is all about what you get. Your favorite food, your favorite getaway, your best friend—they make you happy, relaxed, secure. And, again, there's nothing wrong with *liking* in and of itself, and we don't have to all like the same things. But loving is different. *Loving* is not about what you get. It's about what you give, regardless of what you get in return.

When it comes to whom you love and, consequently, to whom you give yourself in service, ***as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.*** James uses the example of two people who walk into church. There's a rich man and a poor man. The members start thinking, *Oh, it would be so nice to have a rich man join our church. All the good things he could bring to us! But the stinky guy in shabby clothes, I suppose he can stay if he'd like. There's a spot in the back. He's probably going to ask for help, tax our time, be more of a burden than a blessing.* That's the favoritism God condemns. It's seeing someone through the lens of what you might get out of them. In this example, neither the rich man nor the poor man were loved. They were both treated as objects. The only difference was that the rich man was considered a more valuable object than the poor man.

What made it even worse was that such rich people were treating the congregation as objects too—exploiting them, dragging them to court, dragging the name of Jesus through the dirt. But the congregation didn't even seem to notice. They continued to trample over the worthless poor in their rush to embrace their abusers. They just couldn't take their eyes off the money. They just couldn't stand to squander an opportunity to get, even though it was getting them nothing good.

This kind of behavior is so normal that we barely notice it anymore. Politicians use their colleagues and constituents like rungs on a ladder, caring little about whom they step on as they climb to power. Businesses address letters to their valued customers and we hardly realize that what they really value is the money in our pockets. It's so normal, so mundane, that we might not even notice that it's the way the whole world works: people have become objects, tools to use only as long as you need them—*throw 'em away when you're done*—and everyone is so focused on how they're going to use other people that they fail to realize that other people are seeing them the same way—as tools, as objects, as opportunities to get.

But we're missing the specific point of the passage if we only think about politicians and businessmen and other people *out there*, because this warning about favoritism is addressed to a church—to Christians just like us. The congregation that sees prospective members as tools—whether to increase its income so that it can do more or to increase its membership so that it can brag more. The husband and wife who each consider the primary role of the other to make their own life easier. The children who haven't yet learned how to hide their motives, who so openly treat their parents and siblings and friends as planets that revolve around them at the center of their own universe. It's not so different from *out there* at all, so natural, so normal, that we don't even notice we're doing it, much less that it's sinful. Nor do we notice that it's the source of so much disappointment and sadness. If a congregation wants to grow simply for the sake of growth but doesn't, it gets frustrated that it didn't get what it wanted from its community. If a bride and groom each make their vows with their eyes only on what they're going to get out of the marriage, it will not take long at all for the butterflies to leave the stomach and resentment to settle into the heart. If parents see their children as objects from which to get happiness and fulfillment and children see their parents as objects from which to get freedom to do whatever they want and rescue from the trouble they get into for doing it, it's no wonder that they only complain about each other.

What a wonderful world this would be if there were no favoritism, if no one were an opportunity to get and everyone were an opportunity to give! But not even that's the primary point of the passage—how favoritism spoils our relationships with each other. The primary point is that it ruins our relationship with God. It breaks the overarching commandment, the Golden Rule, here called ***the royal law: Love your neighbor as yourself***. Favoritism isn't about whom you like; it's about whom you love. If you show favoritism, you're not loving your neighbor at all—even the one that you favor. You're making it all about what you can get. You're showing that your favorite person in all the world is you. And God hates it.

Of course, there are worse sins, right? Just think about things like adultery and murder, sins that ruin marriages and land people in the electric chair. But just like favoritism, sins like adultery and murder are crimes against the ***royal law***, to love your neighbor as yourself. That's why God says, ***Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it***. Picture all God's laws like a single pane of glass. It doesn't matter where you hit it with a hammer. You break one part of it and the whole thing falls into pieces. It's not just murderers and adulterers who go to hell. It's also people who play favorites.

When you understand what it means to ***love your neighbor as yourself***, isn't it too tall an order, too high for anyone to reach? To always consider yourself everybody's servant and nobody's master, even when they give nothing but grief in return, especially since you live in a world where it seems the only way to get something is to take it? But notice to whom the command is given: ***As believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ***. Why do you suppose he chooses those words? And why do you suppose he writes them even before the command? It's to remind us who we are. We may be objects to the world and even often to each other, but not to Jesus. That's why he's so glorious. Jesus never has and he never will see you as an opportunity to get, but always as an opportunity to give. Remember the difference between *liking* and *loving*? God didn't so *like* ***the world that he gave his one and only Son***. It wasn't about what he could get. He ***so loved the world***. It was about what he could give. That's why he sent his Son, that's why Jesus came to keep the whole law for you even though you've taken the hammer to it again and again, that's why he died for you, that's why he saved you, that's why he keeps on forgiving you and promises you heaven instead of hell—not because of what's in you, but because of what's in him, namely love.

Now, ***as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ***—it changes the way you see the world. No longer through the lens of what you might get out of people, but the way that Jesus sees them, the way that Jesus sees you, through the lens of love. It changes the way the Christian congregation sees its community: not as numbers or dollar signs, but as tens of thousands of opportunities to give a gift that lasts forever. It changes the way the husband sees his wife and vice versa: not as the second party to a contract that hasn't been keeping up their end of the bargain, but as your own flesh that you rejoice to help and forgive and serve, even when they make it hard. It changes the way that parents see their children and vice versa, that a pastor sees his congregation and vice versa, and on and on and on. ***As believers in our***

glorious Lord Jesus Christ, no matter where you are, no matter whom you see, don't show favoritism, show what's inside you. It's simply the love that Jesus keeps on showing to you—there's nothing more glorious. And there's nothing that brings greater happiness.

I take my son Jonah to the assisted-living service we hold on Wednesdays at Brandermill Woods. He helps Jack and Nancy and Velkis hand out the bulletins. A few months ago a blind lady with deteriorating health caught us after the service and said, *Thank you for letting Jonah see our world*. It took a few days for it to sink in what she meant. In a very palpable way to many of those people, theirs is the world of the forgotten. With little more to offer than an inheritance that their care is quickly eating through, they no longer feel the love they once did. I think she was happy that Jonah could at least see that she existed. It's not just people in nursing homes that feel like they're forgotten—but God hasn't forgotten. In a world starving for love, God's love shines gloriously from Jesus, and he has so designed it that it shines through us **as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ**. God grant that it may continue to shine ever more brightly through us into every corner of our lives and our world. Amen.