Deuteronomy 10:17-22, James 2:1-7

“Show no partiality”

It has been a bit of a different week. From Monday through Thursday I was showing off Lancaster County to Rosaria and Pietro Vincenzi and they absolutely loved it. They were so impressed with the sights, your graciousness and hospitality, the culture of hard work, and your interest in mission. I’ve known them for 20 years, as her pastor I buried her mother and I buried his father, and we walked alongside each other through quite a few experiences.

But she surprised me by telling me the biggest problem that they are facing now as a people is this flood of immigrants coming into the country. She really didn’t have anything nice to say, and it reminded me a lot of the battles we fight in this country over immigration. And while I was in Italy I had started an immigrant center, and she was a part of that. We even approached the director of the orphanage to see what we could do and he had said: I don’t want those immigrants around because they might use our bathrooms and then we could get diseases. The more things change the more they stay the same. I can’t wait for this summer and work together with her once again and maybe provide a different perspective for her on those who are different from us.

This week I also had a daughter take her permit exam. She liked it so much that she took it twice. She didn’t do so well the first time. But the guy behind the desk was keeping me up to speed and giving me the play by play. She’s 8-1, 10-2, she’s on the bubble now, uh oh, she can’t miss another one. Finally he looked at me and said, you can put your checkbook away. It was classic, I didn’t realize they were so interactive at the DMV. But then yesterday she got them all right. But we got there at 7:30, first in line. Naomi was in the car and the next guy in line struck up a conversation with me, and every other word was one that I can’t repeat here in public. He smoked continuously, and smelled like my fraternity on a Sunday morning.

I tried to maintain a friendly conversation with him until he looked in the DMV office, which was still closed, and he saw a CDL handbook written in Spanish and said, that’s just incredible and another profanity escaped. What will they think of next? Implying and then saying that he had no love for those who just might need that guide in Spanish.

As a pastor you learn quick that people in general are partial, and they will tell you, normally very clearly. In Florida we had a pulpit exchange with my closest friend who was an African American Baptist pastor, and after the first time he spoke an elder from our church came into my office on Tuesday and said that he wanted to resign. He spoke to me about how God had made whites and blacks each with specific roles with one being over the other as part of God’s plan. We eagerly accepted his resignation.

Another time I had an elder tell me how the KKK had done some good things for the community and the society over time and I agreed with him and pointed out that the Nazis had done a tremendous job in building up the infrastructure of Germany, and how traditionally dictators tend to build the best roads out of any other government. He missed my nuanced remarks and thought I was on his side.

Today, folks, just like last week, James is very, very direct. He tells us that if we have partiality then our faith with Jesus Christ can rightfully be questioned. Not showing partiality is a condition of our faith. Both of our Scriptures tell us that the way we behave toward people, especially strangers and those different from us, indicates what we really believe about God. Let’s read.

**READ**

Let’s look at James and we see that we are starting a new chapter. See, we are just flying through this book of the Bible. Genesis is next, but we just might insert one on the Apostles’ Creed. Let me know what you think, text me for your preference. Genesis which will take a few years or the Apostles Creed which might take a few months. Okay, back to James. Last week we saw that if we are not able to bridle our tongue, our relationship with Jesus Christ is worthless.

Today we have a similar ultimatum, at minimum a very strong condemnation of a character trait that can be found fairly easily within the church. If you show favoritism then again your relationship to Jesus Christ must be put into question. If we see a teenager who is pierced walk into church and we automatically categorize him or her as immoral then we have missed our chance to let them know of one who was pierced just like them, and for them so they could have eternal life.

You see Jesus loved people not out of compulsion or compromise, but out of compassion. Jesus values so highly that all are treated equally that he gives the example of a rich person and a poor person walking into where? Look at vs. 2, “your assembly”. Guess what word that is in Greek? Synagogue. Where did the early Christians meet? In the synagogues, before they were kicked out of even those. So James is really addressing the community of believers with this parable just like his brother used to use.

Do not favor the rich by showing them favoritism over the poor. In 1992 I was helping with the logistics of a conference in Prague, Czechoslovakia. I was partially responsible for all of the details that no one else thinks about. The opening ceremonies were in the central square in Prague close to the statue of Jan Hus, the great reformer. I was responsible for making sure the chairs were set up for the church VIPs. We set up 30 for the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Patriarch of Russia, who was Alexi at the time, the head of the European Catholic Bishop’s conference and down the line. They sat down for the opening ceremonies, but we had forgotten to rope them off from the rest of the crowd. So there they were sitting in their seats and the curious crowd, thousands of them, gathered around nearly on their laps.

Next to Patriarch Alexi was this crippled woman who obviously should not have been standing, and he noticed her and stood up and insisted that she take his seat. There he was standing, but the VIP next to him offered his seat to the Patriarch, who refused, so he offered his seat to someone else in the crowd. I knew what was going to happen, and over a brief period of chaotic time you had all of these VIPs standing up and offering their seats to people in the crowd until they were, all 30 of them, standing. No one was paying any attention to the opening worship because it was happening right in front of them.

Jesus stresses how we have to respond to others as more important than ourselves as Paul mentions in Philippians 2. And James after his parable then in verse 5 uses a beatitude which basically is taken right from his big brother when he states blessed are the poor for there is the kingdom of God. This theme is not new to Scripture, Jesus repeats it over and over again. Remember Jesus’ first sermon? Even though it didn’t turn out as well as he had hoped, his main point in Luke 4:18 was that God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. There is a very clear partiality for the poor by our Savior because no one else really cares for them. Jesus tells us: you have the poor with you always, not so we can disregard them but, because we have to always care for the poor.

But partiality isn’t just based on social class. There are others that we can disregard and consider of less worth than us. In Deuteronomy we find Moses giving a command to the people of Israel and so in turn it is directed to us as well – you shall love the stranger. You shall love those at Wal Mart who don’t look like you or talk like you. You shall love those in the city where you wouldn’t be caught dead and vice versa.

Moses says love the stranger, because you were a stranger in Egypt. We all were strangers. I don’t care how many generations you have been living here in Lancaster County, at one time, you were a stranger and someone helped you. Elder Brewster is one of our relatives on my mother’s side, so my family goes back to being American longer than just about anyone else here. If patriotism is defined by number of generations living in this country, I win. But even my family was helped when they were strangers in this foreign land. As Moses said, 70 strangers walked in Egypt and when they left they were not able to be counted. It is imperative that we remember from where we came and identify ourselves with the strangers in our midst, because then we could show no partiality, because they are like us. Moses says love the stranger by feeding and clothing them.

So, how do we go about as a church showing no partiality? First we have to remember from where we came. William Penn wanted Presbyterians to be the buffer because he knew that he couldn’t count on the Quakers or the Mennonites to fight off the hostile forces. We have been strangers so as a church we need to continue to reach out.

We must focus on the poor not as projects. As one person told me who came to get food, they want me to know Jesus but they didn’t want to hang out with me and spend time with me. Jesus spent his time with the poor, the leper, the prostitutes. He would have spent less time at Fireside and more time at the Swan.

We have to be careful what we say about strangers. Don’t stereotype all people who speak Spanish, or those of a different color, or those who are poor. We are strangers to them and so we can’t predicate how we treat them by how they treat us. We are called to reach out to the stranger.

Finally, the church has to be a place where there are no social distinctions. They just can’t exists among us. I didn’t really choose this topic, it chose us today. I don’t know who needs to hear the message that if we are partial then our faith is in question. But maybe we all do. May God bless us and keep us as we look to remember our own strangeness as we reach out to others around us.

Amen.