

Naming Your "Isms"
Sermon Series on James
First Congregational Church
May 26, 2019
Rev. Julie G. Olmsted

The Book of James, most scholars agree, was indeed written by James the brother of Jesus. James is considered the Christian "Primer" on how to be church. It is not theological, but very spiritual, instructive and practical. Last week we focused on how to get through hard times. This week we go inward to learn anew how to cope with and be victorious over the various (endless?) "isms" from which we suffer (and make others suffer) as human beings in general, and as followers of Christ, in particular.

We have here from James a clear admonition to not prefer the rich over the poor. But if we take the admonition and expand it to "favoritism" in general, there is a wide swath of "isms" we could cover. What James is referring to is what I am going to call, for the sake of our conversation today, the filters through which we see everything in life. We do not show favoritism until and unless we see someone who we think "deserves" more than another (or "deserves" less). We do not give anyone preferential treatment unless we "see" someone in a certain light, unless we observe through the lens of our minds. In other words, people show up for us in the way we have framed them in our seeing and listening. They literally can't show up otherwise, because we cannot see outside of the way we see!

And we believe that our views are *true*. We believe that our observations, thoughts and judgements are *true*. We believe that it IS the way we see it. Because our eyes tell the truth, right? There's nothing more correct than *what we see*. It's like Mark a couple of weeks ago, "Let me see the wounds on his hands. THEN I'll believe." I'll believe it when I see it. That's what we say, yes? But I have a radical assertion today. And that is what I want to impress upon you this morning. NOT that we believe what we see. But that we see what we believe.

You and I have ways of seeing the world, ways of seeing other human beings. And the way that we see determines the way that people show up for us. Time after time after time, people will do and say things that PROVE that we are right about them. The filters through we see paint those around us in ways that make us right, *all the time*. Oh how we love to be right.

A rich man (or a well-dressed, alert, nice-looking man, woman or couple) walks in and we think, "Oh, boy, I like this person. This would be a good person for our church. Let's be friendly. Let's approach this person. Let's throw out the lifeline..." Someone unstable, poorly dressed, loud or disruptive, we think, "Oh! How can we discreetly get rid of this person? How can we very nicely but firmly get them to leave?" Don't think I don't know this. Don't think God doesn't know this. And don't think I blame you. Or that God blames you. Just recognize that it's true. Recognize that we all have our "isms." We all have our thoughts, our prejudices, our concerns, and our preferences, about people "not like us." And DON'T think that there aren't cases in which we need to take action to ensure our

congregation's safety. We need to be safe. We need to have order. We need to have an atmosphere of caring and safety and peace.

Outside of that, however, you and I need to always be aware of our own prejudices. We need to see the way we're seeing. How about our spouses? How many of you KNOW how your spouse is? You see them in a certain way and, true to form, they show up the way you expect them to, why? Because the way you see them determines how they will show up!

Your friend, your co-worker, your mother or your father? Your sister or brother or child? You KNOW how they are going to be because *that's how they are*. Here's an experiment for you. When you next encounter a particular person (you know who they are), try praying while you're listening to them. Try saying some version of the following: "God, please help me see this person differently. Let me see them the way that you do." See what happens. See if there is not a little light that shows you something different.

How many of you are racist? Sexist? Homophobic? Classist? Ageist? I actually heard someone say that if you weren't running for president in your fifties, you were too old. I thought to myself, "You need to come to my church. You need to see the people in my church who are leaders in nearly every capacity. You would perhaps change your mind about this."

If we tried to eradicate all of our "isms" I'm afraid we wouldn't have time for anything else, friends. But there is an answer. And the answer isn't to change yourself. It is to let yourself be changed by God. That means an open heart. That means a willingness to be corrected and to admit our weaknesses, not in a guilty, fearful, shaming way, but in a trusting and honest (matter-of-fact) way. Self-awareness is a beautiful thing. But we don't stay stuck in contemplating our navels or worrying about whether we "measure up." Remember we all are God's beloveds, in whom God is well pleased. To become as a little child, we recall, is to have access to the kingdom. Maybe we should have the following prayer written on our hearts and minds.

God be in my head and in my understanding;
God be in my eyes and in my looking;
God be in my mouth and in my speaking;
God be in my heart and in my thinking;
God be at my end and in my parting.

God bless us, isms and all. Through God's love we all are saved. Amen.