**Pentecost 15, All Saints, Peterborough September 9, 2018**

In the portion of his letter we heard today, James asks, “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Jesus Christ? .... You do well if you fulfill the law: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin ….” And also he asks, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but have no works?...faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” James reminds us it’s not enough to pray for others, to pray that the world would be more fair and just; we are being asked to live it out in our actions and attitudes. It’s not even really enough to be respectful to others; we’re being asked to truly love others, to see others, even and especially those most different from us, as our neighbors, as fellow children of God, as fully worthy of dignity and love.

This may sound obvious, but it’s actually quite difficult to do. We can see in the culture around us that some violent prejudices and self-protective behaviors are deeply ingrained. And when we’re honest with ourselves, we can recognize many biases and defenses in our own thinking and feeling. In fact, neuroscience teaches us that our brains are wired to show partiality for those who feel safest to us, who seem most like us, with whom we seem to share things in common. And then we are culturally trained to build on those affinities. Of course we make distinctions between people.

And though James talks about rich and poor in this passage, in his letters Paul talks about Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free. In our culture we talk about male and female, gay and straight, black and white, first world and developing world, privileged and disenfranchised. We use categories to describe our differing experiences, to talk about injustice, and sometimes, to dream about rising above them in a different world and way of being.

Like many of us, I have always been concerned about social divides, especially racism, and both the subtle and blatant prejudices in our society and buried within myself. I know we all have them, and yet as the years have gone by, I have grown to feel intensely uncomfortable about the ways my background and inborn attitudes may have limited my ability to truly befriend and work with people different from me. This is actually one of the reasons I stopped being a school chaplain and went back to school to become a therapist; I wanted to gain more skills to connect with people no matter what their age or race or orientation or culture. I wanted also to be able to follow Jesus in connecting with people on the margins, in poverty or addiction or mental illness, to help anyone looking for support, looking for God. I realized it was not enough to have an open heart and good intentions; I needed more skills and more understanding.

I had taken classes about race and culture, economic and social justice; I had intellectual awareness of differences in experience. But more helpful to me has been interpersonal diversity training to help me better understand myself and build connections with others across social boundaries. Though it can be painful, multicultural learning has felt central to my faith; it’s a way that I can continue to grow in learning to love my neighbor as myself.

Sometimes people ask why we have to do all this work? Shouldn’t loving our neighbors be simpler; can’t we just be kind and respectful to everyone? In theory, yes, but we all have our stories that make us who we are and limit our ability to see others and recognize “the content of their character” rather than the color of their skin, or the clothes they wear, or the neighborhoods they live in.

As for me, I grew up in an upper middle class, white, English heritage suburban family; I went to schools and universities where the students were mostly white and comfortable. I married a man with a very similar culture and background, and we’ve lived and worked in majority white, privileged academic settings all of our lives, where we were taught good values of generosity, service, and respect for others.

But how has this life of privilege and protection prepared me to cross boundaries of socio-economics and color and culture? How have I been equipped to live out the very values I say I treasure the most: to share God’s love with everyone and to love all my neighbors as myself?

I think I represent the Episcopal Church as an institution. We have so much to be thankful for in our history and tradition **and** we also have an historical legacy of privilege and separation that limits our ability to love sometimes. We can’t love our neighbors as ourselves if we privately see them as alien. And many studies have shown that people who live in mostly monocultural settings are the ones who most fear those who are of a different color, culture or religion. Learning from others on a personal level about what makes each of us different, what is valuable about our diversity, how our differing experiences and perspectives can give us deeper understanding even of God; engaging in all this work takes study and practice, commitment and courage. And it can be life changing.

Several years ago a film and discussion was making the rounds of many churches and schools, it was also shown on PBS, maybe you saw it: called *Traces of the Trade, a story from the Deep North*. It tells the story of a woman, Katrina Browne, from a prominent New England family, which included Episcopal priests and bishops as well as politicians and financiers, researching her family’s roots in the lovely town of Bristol, Rhode Island. She comes to realize with sadness and horror that their historical wealth, property, and social status is owed to the tremendous profits her forebears made in the slave trade, running slave ships from Rhode Island to Ghana to Cuba and back again.

In response to this realization, Ms. Browne wrote to as many cousins and relatives as she could find and invited them to gather and share their knowledge and memories of the family’s past, and to process what their benefits from slavery might mean to them. Some didn’t want to talk about this ugly part of their heritage, but ultimately, a small group of them do decide to take the journey, to re-trace the route of their ancestors’ ships to these far shores and work together to confront the hard truths of the legacy they have inherited. It’s an amazing story and film; I highly recommend it.

I had a similar feeling of sadness and horror several years ago. I knew that many of the churches in the area of DE where we lived and worked, were founded in the 18th century by the SPG, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. I often preached in one of these colonial churches and had been taught in seminary about the great work of the SPG founding churches and missions around the world.

But until a few years ago I did not know that this mission work was largely funded by a huge sugar cane operation in the Caribbean, and the slaves on these plantations were literally branded with the letters SPG on their bodies. Somehow the irony and hypocrisy of owning and branding slaves and working them in horrific conditions for the sake of the Gospel was not clear to these Christian people.

We also learned through a slavery research project in our diocese in DE that many of the Episcopal clergy at that time owned slaves and listed them in their wills as chattel, along with their cows and chickens and farm implements, even distributing them to their heirs without regard to separating husbands and wives or parents and children. These were men of their time, yes, and like all of us, they had blinders on about their own severely limited ability to even recognize, much less love, their neighbors.

Some of us might share this experience that we are proud of our families and heritage in some ways, but also concerned about the attitudes our forebears may have held and actions they may have done. My grandparents and my father and step-mother were politely but deeply racist and classist. I know that in at least small unconscious ways, perspectives I have inherited from them might prevent me from seeing people who are different from me as my equals in the eyes of God.

Most of us are first unconsciously programmed and then purposely taught to make distinctions between people and seek out those most like ourselves. It’s natural to seek “tribes” of our own people to give us safety and protection. In today’s Gospel, Jesus himself at first turns away a woman asking for healing because she is not Jewish, not of his culture, whose religion and laws have taught him she is unclean, both as a woman and as a Gentile, so unworthy to approach him and ask for help.

Could it be that in his humanness, even Jesus was not immune to inherited prejudice? Jesus goes so far as to imply she is just a dog in the house of the children of God. But when the woman reminds him that even dogs are allowed to eat the crumbs the children leave under the table, Jesus accepts correction by her and gives her healing, praises her faith, and sees her in a new way.

At first Jesus assessed this woman’s outside- her gender, her clothes, her ethnic identity- but after their interaction he recognized her worthiness to receive help and love. He knew her to be his neighbor. Over and over again in the Christian scriptures, Jesus and then his followers share love, healing and fellowship with outsiders and outcasts, often getting themselves in trouble with the religious officials who saw these connections as sinful and dangerous.

Jesus’ example, James’ letter, and our baptismal vows, all call us to take the risk to reach beyond our comfortable tribal boundaries and truly connect with others, learning our shared humanity, learning to be true neighbors, through sharing fellowship and food, and working or worshiping side by side.

In making connections with my neighbors, I have had to learn and accept the hard truth that just as I did not earn and do not deserve all the financial and social benefits of my life, others do not deserve the poverty, injustice, or hunger in theirs. I have come to understand that my anger and judgment of others usually arises from my own discomfort and ignorance because I do not know or understand their experience.

As a society, we are being confronted over and over, learning from Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown and Sandra Bland and the people of Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, and the people of Puerto Rico, and the families torn apart at the border, that all people are not seen the same or treated fairly, that our society is not just and our hearts are not loving much of the time.

And so James asks, “…do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?”

And you know, as much as I believe in Jesus as Lord, and I want to love other people better, and I want to take more responsibility for my own privilege, the hard fact is I am not yet willing to give up too much, or to suffer much for the sake of my beliefs! As a straight, white, educated, wealthy person I can choose whenever I want, to ignore the suffering of trans people, the un-just treatment of black people, the unfair judgments of the poor or addicted or mentally ill. I give thanks for the clients who teach me so much about their lives and struggles. And I can do other things to help keep me honest and engaged, but sometimes it’s tempting to just hide in my comfortable life.

Maybe realizing that God wants us all to keep growing and that none of us should feel self-satisfied is a beginning. And the fact that both Jesus and James saw all kinds of prejudice and favoritism in their time 2000 years ago shows that it’s nothing new to the human experience!

In today’s Gospel Jesus heals a man’s hearing with the word *Ephphatha, Be Opened!* May our ears and eyes, our hearts and minds, all be opened by Jesus to the worthiness and dignity of all God’s children, especially those who make us the most uncomfortable, for they are the ones who have the most to teach us.

As our communities and our country continue to struggle, as we strive to grow in understanding, and appreciating, our differences, let’s offer prayers, and works, of love, believing in Paul’s promise that “in Christ there is no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, no male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus.” Amen.