

Jon Hauerwas – September 2, 2018 – Up  
Proverbs 22:1-2, 9, 16, 22-23 and James 2:1-9, 26

We understand that Christ came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for others. This is a bedrock principle of our faith. So with him as our guide and template for holy living, Christian communities and individuals within the greater body have long sought to serve in his name. In time, we learn to offer what Robert Schnase calls the *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* by displaying radical hospitality, pursuing passionate worship, encouraging intentional faith development, engaging in risk-taking mission and service, and committing ourselves to extravagant generosity.<sup>1</sup> Yes. As part of the community of faith, we experience a change in ourselves in which our own, personal preferences and demands recede into the background as the needs of the greater body assume ever-greater significance.

This all leads me to a question this morning. Namely, what is the measure of a life well-lived? Is such a life to be found by always sitting in the place of honor – distinguished, revered, and loved? Or is it to be found in dying to self, and recognizing the face of God in each person that we meet?

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

When I graduated from seminary in 2006, I began serving as an Associate Pastor for Mission at Worthington Presbyterian Church in suburban, Columbus, Ohio. The picturesque campus there overlooks the village green. And the congregation boasts many prominent members, including university presidents, physicians, attorneys, and business leaders. The current and former mayors are members there. The city manager is too.

My role amid that privileged congregation involved mobilizing church members to serve needs beyond the walls of the church. And in that capacity, I can still recall an occasion when I was visiting with the residents of a low-income senior facility that our church had sponsored for years. On this particular occasion, a resident pulled me aside and asked me a question that took me by surprise. “Would I be welcome at your church?” she wondered.

I did not know the woman well, and I began to consider the various causes of her insecurity. What is it, I wondered, that might cause others to think less of her? Was she struggling with an obvious mental health issue? Had she been in prison? Drawing a blank, I said, “What do you mean?”

“Well,” she replied, “this place, the place where I live, is an outreach of your congregation. That means that I am the one in need here and that the congregation is helping me. If I was to come to a service there on a Sunday morning, would people turn away from me?”

Hindsight is always 20/20, and I now realize that my response was not as articulate as it might have been. I reminded her of another resident at the same facility who was an active member of the congregation that I served. I encouraged her to meet with the other resident, find out when the church bus arrived, and join her for a service where she could come and see for herself.

And, yet, despite my best efforts, I could tell that the woman who began this conversation wanted more from me. “Come and see,” wasn’t good enough. And it was as if she was seeking my firm assurance that when she walked through the front door of that church, the congregation would welcome her with an infusion of radical hospitality. Now, without a doubt, I hoped that that would be the case. But, the best that I could offer at the time was “come and see.”

Let us hear again the message of our second lesson this morning. “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord

Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Thankfully, the kinds of practices that James mentions are becoming less and less common in our increasingly diverse and global world. For me, it is hard to imagine an usher leading a visitor to a segregated part of the worship space on account of his or her appearance. And, if all of the seating happened to be filled, most congregations will do whatever they could to accommodate, even if that meant bringing in extra chairs. Intuitively, we know how important it is to be hospitable in the church.

And yet, our communication is often much more subtle than that. Do we make eye contact? Do we smile? Do we introduce ourselves? Do we appear to be glad that

they are here? Friends, we never know what is really going on in the life of our neighbor. But, this much is true: there are a lot of hurting people in this world - some of whom have endured about all of the rejection that they can manage.

And while we all have our baggage, we also have different strategies for dealing with it. Some of us are forthcoming about our struggles, while others seek to hide their pain from prying eyes and inquiring minds. What draws us together in the church is a safe place where we can authentically be ourselves, even as we acknowledge that we are both a work in progress and a forgiven child of God.

And so, the God of love calls us near and lifts us up. And that very same God calls our neighbors, and our friends, and our enemies, and the destitute, and powerful, and the lame. Because the Christian community is, and has always been, a beautiful symphony of diverse people, gifts, and offerings, each called to the common purpose of honoring Christ in both word and in deed. May it be so. All thanks be to God. Amen.