

Long, Black, and Velvet
James 2:1-13
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Maybe you've heard the story about a woman who received a gift from her eccentric aunt for Christmas. Now the aunt was a bit of a hoarder, and the niece was used to getting really tacky gifts from her but didn't take much offense and just donated them to charity, thinking it's the thought that counts. Well, on the Christmas in question, she opens the gift to find a nice two-pound box of gourmet chocolates, and she thinks, finally, she's given me something I can use. Who doesn't like chocolate, right? So she opens it up and grabs one and takes a big bite and immediately spits it out. Something was horribly wrong. It was disgusting! And she thought, how can you possibly mess up chocolate? So she looks on the box and finds a Best Used By date from the mid 1970s!

Yes, it's called regifting, and you've all done it. You may not be proud of it, or good at it, but you've taken something you've received, or bought on the cheap, and turned around and given it someone else so you could avoid throwing it away or avoid going shopping. It is actually a rather commendable exercise in thrift, as long as you don't mind taking the risk you will be exposed. But there are times when you really should just ante up. Consider the story of one church's attempt to clothe a refugee family from Cambodia. A man from the congregation stood before his brothers and sisters in Christ and asked them to provide clothing for the family.

He told them that the children were getting ready to enter a new school and the parents were about to look for jobs that could support their new life in the United States. And the church responded generously. A few weeks later, however, the man stood up again and spoke in a quiet voice that was vibrating with anger. “I asked you to clothe this family,” he said. “Instead I have received castoffs from decades ago, clothes that are out of date, out of style. Clothes that are missing buttons, clothes with broken zippers, clothes that are dirty. These are not the kinds of clothes a man can find a job in. You would never send your own children to school dressed in the clothes you have offered to this family. I am not asking for your castoffs. I am asking you to clothe this family.” Ouch! Well, the church repented, and the family got off to a good start, but my hunch is that none of the donors would ever have given any of that old stuff to their own friends, or to a new mother at a baby shower. So why would they give it to some Cambodians? Well, the book of James has something to say about that. Let’s take a look at James 2:1-8.

If there’s a book at the Bible that’s aimed squarely at us, it’s James, and tonight’s passage shows us how it’s aimed directly at the middle class, so to speak. In the example of favoritism, or partiality, that James uses, he describes a rich person and poor person, one with fine clothes and gold rings, and the other with dirty clothes. He audience is apparently neither of these, and put in the position of welcoming both. It’s even clearer that the audience is not rich since later on he describes how it is the rich who oppress them and drag them into court. No, his

readers are people probably a lot like us, and so we find throughout the book a lot of themes that still matter to those of us gathered in this room: trials and temptations, the relationship between faith and works, how we should behave toward one another, how we interact with the world, suffering, judgment, prayer, and healing, to name just a few. It's a practical book, and a good book for Lent, shining light into the nooks and crannies of the human spirit where repentance may be necessary. It is honest and uncompromising, the way we need to be about ourselves in this season.

Last Sunday, I invited you to take a look at the ways you really spend you time, and the ways you really invest your energy and passion, even in good and valuable and useful things, to see if there wasn't some repentance, some turning away to be done, from even those benign things, and a turning to a deeper dependence on God, or to the Kingdom of God. I hope that was a fruitful exercise for you and I would love to hear what you discovered about yourselves. I chose this passage from James for this week because it goes even further and offers us an invitation to take an honest and uncompromising look at those parts of our life we take for granted, those habits and instincts that create blind spots where we can't see how we are unintentionally betraying the Gospel or treading upon others. We have those blind spots in our faith, just like we do in our cars, those places our rearview mirrors just can't show us, but which often have someone there we could injure if we are not careful. It may not technically violate one of the Ten

Commandments to hold a higher opinion of someone you think is rich and well-dressed than of someone who is poor and shabbily dressed but can there be any doubt that such a view betrays Christ and dehumanizes certain people at the expense of others? We don't need the book of James to tell us that, do we?

Or perhaps we do, because we still practice today the kind of favoritism he condemned two thousand years ago. What should be a theological no-brainer lingers with us even with this inescapable Biblical shot to the ribs. Maybe that's why, after describing the offense, that James goes on to tell them why it is a sin after all, and how favoritism is not really any different than adultery or murder, how all our acts, all our thoughts, are ultimately subject not to the Ten Commandments, but to the "royal law," the law that is above culture, the law that is above empire, the law that is above, if you will, even those Ten Commandments of their own tradition, the royal law of "you shall love your neighbor as yourself," the law where the ethical rubber meets the divine road.

But why is this favoritism such a hard thing to overcome? Let me suggest that there are areas of our lives by which we can get so culture-bound, gender-bound, language-bound, class-bound, and tradition-bound, that we end up unintentionally violating the royal law. And those areas in which we are bound up create those blind spots, those unexamined, maybe even untouchable assumptions about ourselves that we take for granted but which have consequences for the whole body of Christ. That's why I'm wearing this Geneva gown today, because in

my life, it's an example of something I took for granted, on the basis of my early church experience, my position as a pastor, my socioeconomic status, and probably several other areas as well, which may unintentionally have had the effect of keeping people from hearing the Gospel, or approaching me with a spiritual issue. It seems kind of silly, right? How could the clothing someone wears affect what other people think about them, or treat them? Oh wait, we're reading that part of the book of James that deals precisely with that subject.

The Geneva gown comes from the time of the Protestant Reformation, when certain parts of the church wanted to emphasize study of the Bible over blind obedience to tradition, and what was called the priesthood of all believers, the idea that everyone was equal in God's eyes, and so they turned to sectors of their societies that reinforced those choices, and so they borrowed from the academic and legal fields. This gown looks like what you would see at a university graduation, or in a courtroom, even today. Its design is "meant to convey the authority and solemn duty of the ordained ministry as called by God to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus and preach the biblical Word of God." At the same time, maybe in recognition of what James is warning against, one of the points of the robe is to guard against ostentation, and to obscure possibly distracting individual habits and fashion preferences, and to instead draw attention to the wearer's office and not the person. As one person put it, the robe signifies the office: "We submit

to the office, not to the man, during worship...The purpose of the robe is to cover the man and accent his God-ordained office or calling.”

That is all very fine and noble on one hand, and it has been the accepted and taken-for-granted viewpoint of generations of churches and their pastors. But there’s always an “other hand.” On the other hand, the level of formality introduced by the robe creates a distance that Jesus never created, the possibility for favoritism that James condemns. At some level, however subtle it may be, it says, “I’m the professional, the trained one, the expert, and you are not.” At some level, however subtle it may be, it says, “I’m the law around here, and what I say goes.” If pastors want to really connect at a personal level, they should wear what others wear, flannel and jeans, shorts and flipflops, whatever may be contextually appropriate. How would a convicted felon, recently released from prison, feel in church seeing someone who looks like the judge who sent him away? Or the woman who couldn’t afford to go to college reminded of the fact she’ll never graduate by looking at the person who looks like the professor who will never hand her that diploma?

As I said before, I took the Geneva gown for granted until I began to take notice of the subtle ways my middle-class, Midwestern church was discriminating against certain people in the congregation. There were certain people who would never attend retreats, or Bible studies even though they wanted to, and I never understood why until I figured out it was because they couldn’t afford two nights

away or the books that were required for a class. There's a famous observation that in many church buildings there's an upstairs church and a downstairs church, and they rarely interact. That's because the downstairs church is the one called Alcoholics Anonymous, and for subtle, blind spot, taken-for-granted kinds of reasons, neither kind of church can seem to find the staircase. Last year, there was a popular story going around social media about the newly-hired pastor of a mega church who showed up on his first Sunday dressed as a homeless man and when he was not well-received, got up in the pulpit and gave his new congregation a "book of James" kind of reproach. It turns out that the story is merely a hoax, but you can see why so many people believed it, because it's not very far from the truth.

It's not for very enlightened reasons that I don't wear this robe every Sunday here. I love to wear vestments. Maybe if we had air-conditioning, or if previous pastors had worn it and you expected it, I'd be wearing it. As I said, it has its pros and its cons and that's why it is a good case study in our blind spots, a good call to take a critical look at our customs and our attitudes and our practices. But let's take a look at an even better example that even more directly relates to us, one that has been making its way around social media this week. Maybe you've seen the article by a woman named Mawuna Remarque Koutonin who is editor of SiliconAfrica.com that makes the pretty pointed observation that the word we frequently use for ourselves, expatriate, or expat for short, is almost exclusively used for white, wealthy, westerners living in countries other than their nation of

citizenship, while virtually all others are labeled “immigrant.” Among the evidence she cites is a recent Wall Street blog dedicated to the life of expats in which was recently featured a story entitled, ‘Who is an expat, anyway?’. Here are the main conclusions: “Some arrivals are described as expats; others as immigrants; and some simply as migrants. It depends on social class, country of origin and economic status. It’s strange to hear some people in Hong Kong described as expats, but not others. Anyone with roots in a western country is considered an expat...Filipino domestic helpers are just guests, even if they’ve been here for decades. Mandarin-speaking main-land Chinese are rarely regarded as expats...It’s a double standard woven into official policy.”

Now you can quibble with the terminology of expat, immigrant, migrant, guest, etc., if you must, but ask yourself when was the last time you heard of a Nicaraguan maid or coffee harvester referred to here as an expat? I just joined a Facebook group called “Gringo Expats in Costa Rica,” not “Gringo Immigrants to Costa Rica.” Of course, we’re entitled to call ourselves what we want, but why don’t we call everybody else what we are when we are all the same?

Ms. Koutonin’s conclusion isn’t pleasing to the ear, because it brings the same kind of sting James is offering, but it calls us back to the kind of repentance we are talking about this Lent. She says, “Most white people deny that they enjoy the privileges of a racist system. And why not? But our responsibility [as Africans] is to point out and to deny them these privileges directly related to an outdated

supremacist ideology. If you see those “expats” in Africa, call them immigrants like everyone else. If that hurts their white superiority, they can jump in the air and stay there. The political deconstruction of this outdated worldview must continue.” And, we must add from our Christian point of view, the spiritual deconstruction of an unexamined view of our blind spots.

What is this episode in James except a case in which the church is in some way culture-bound, falling back on cultural, rather than gospel, ways of viewing people? Whatever our cultural or familial or ecclesiastical stumbling blocks may be, we’re called to overcome them. They are just as important to avoid as adultery or murder, or any of the other commandments. We cannot delude ourselves by thinking that there are only the certain areas in our lives that are subject to repentance. Repentance is hard, and it’s especially hard when it’s in those blind spots that you’ve spent your whole life creating. But Lent is like one of those special mirrors you can get for your car, the kind that let you see into those blind spots to make sure you don’t run into anyone else and cause damage to self or others. May God help us take a good hard look at every area of our lives, and turn away from those that take life, and turn to those that give life. Amen.