

“Astounded Beyond Measure”
James 2:1-17 Mark 7:24-37
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, September 5, 2021
First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho
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The more things change, the more... (they stay the same). Have you heard that before? The more things change, the more they stay the same. This is another way to recognize that nothing is permanent, everything is in flux, we live in a finite world, and change is a constant reality. But it also points out that although contexts shift, larger themes remain.

We see this in current situations, such as what some call a labor crisis. “Help Wanted” signs are up all over the place, but others point out this is not a labor crisis, this is class warfare. Corporate America based on industrial Capitalism has a pyramid shape, with a very small number of Directors or Owners at the top and the vast majority of people along the lower portions. Wealth and power, however, are concentrated at the top. The investor class of billionaires add to their wealth, even during the pandemic, and the stock market continues to set record highs; but the wage slaves at the bottom are acting out as the realities of working two or three part-time jobs with no benefits in the service industry takes its toll.

We need to remember when we hear about a booming stock market that 80 percent of stocks are held by 10 percent of the stockholders. 90 percent of stockholders don't experience the big boom, and most people in our country are not stockholders at all. CEO's, corporate boards, these are an exclusive portion of society who go out of their way to protect the principle. In the meantime, countless millions of people face hardships such as chronic hunger, lack of affordable housing, dead-end jobs, increased long-term debt, among other challenges. If a financial or health crisis emerges, it can be enough to wipe you out.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. In James, we also hear about favoritism, and how people in fine clothes are treated differently than the poor. Society creates distinctions. These social distinctions, of course, are extensions of the people who make up the society, most of whom are locked behind the bars of their own judging mind, framing their worldview through dualistic thinking, favoring the seeming comfort of egoic control and a limited mindset that excludes and pushes away the unknown or the other who are different.

James makes some points through questions, “Listen, my 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 God promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?” The more things change, the more they stay the same, as industry, government, economy, powers and principalities work to keep the status quo and protect the system as it is.

James also talks about loving your neighbor as yourself and how this is very difficult to live out. Again, history echoes as we see this in our culture. Entire generations tried to love their neighbors, tried to help the poor. In the 1940’s, 50’s and 60’s it was through social programs and government support. In the 1970’s and 80’s, this shifted to private industry and organizations like the church. By the 1990’s and decades since then, these generations of people who tried to help have become cynical people, and the poverty remains and is getting worse. At the root of this systemic cynicism is a bewilderment and a sense of being overwhelmed by the world’s problems. But there’s a deeper root, one that stems from trying to love your neighbor as

yourself, which is the second commandment Jesus points out as a summary of the law, but forgetting or ignoring or shunning the first commandment, to Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself; two commandments, connected. If you don't love God you will not realize that God loves you already as you are. This Source of unconditional love, and divine presence in your own heart is what empowers love for the neighbor and transformation of the world.

In Mark these dynamics play out in story form. Jesus, a Jewish Rabbi with small town, country roots and a tribal sense of identity as Gods chosen people, intentionally travels beyond the boundaries not only geographically, but in terms of religion, spirituality, culture, gender, and ethnicity.

Let's explore this story from our own era. In the early 2,000's, the Presbyterian Church (USA) was part of a larger ecumenical and social effort to boycott Yum! Brand fast-food places like Pizza Hut, KFC, Taco Bell, and some universities stopped putting tomatoes on their cafeteria sandwiches. This issue was about fair wages. [The Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#), based out of Florida, includes people who pick produce in the fields and get paid by the pound. They pushed for increasing the per-pound pay by one

cent per pound. Corporate America resisted and it took years to get fast-food chains to sign on to the Coalition's "Fair Food Program". To this day, the main holdout is Wendy's, the hamburger place. ([HERE is a link to a 2021 Boycott Wendy's Tour scheduled for this fall](#)).

([HERE is a link to PCUSA info on Fair Food Programs and boycotts](#))

There's a Wendy's getting built out in Ponderay across from North 40. But Wendy's "remains the only major fast-food chain still refusing [...] to join the only program proven to prevent human rights abuses in the U.S. agricultural industry." (<https://ciw-online.org/blog/2021/07/save-the-date-2021-boycott-wendys-tour-essential-rights-for-essential-workers/>). They have outsourced their tomato picking to Mexico, and they fail to ensure fair pay to the workers. The boycott continues, class warfare rages on, and the struggle of classes, ethnicity, human dignity, and the value of work continues to remind us that on one side of the coin is justice, but on the other side of the same coin is love.

The more things change the more they stay the same as Jesus visits Tyre and Sidon, two wealthy port cities that make their money on the backs of Jewish peasant farmers who live inland and depend on shipping routes to sell their crops. Social, economic, political, and religious issues overlap and the tension is evident in his exchange of name-calling with this woman. But

like all spiritual growth, the discomfort of putting your faith in action is both resisted and essential. This woman, who is not Jewish, and is classified as the other, a Gentile, one who benefits from the economic injustice of unfair trade practices; she needs Jesus to help her because her situation is desperate. But also, Jesus needs this woman to expand his understanding of ministry and move him beyond a tribal model, to expand his experience of what God is doing beyond the borders and structures of institutional religion. As love for God and love for the neighbor come together, this woman and Jesus help each other and God's grace has a breakthrough which echoes into our own day, our own struggles, and the contexts we face as organized religion fades, economic injustice rages, wealth inequality goes unchecked; the Holy Spirit leads into uncharted territory.

Jesus needs us to grow up, to let go of selfish greed, the quest for power, and the circling of wagons to defend against what our ego can't handle. Jesus is challenging us to do what he did, "to set out and go away" from the familiar. And like the woman, we need Jesus to love us unconditionally, to help us love God and claim divine presence in our own soul, like Jesus did. We need Jesus to help us grow up spiritually and help us

respond to his invitation to follow. We need Jesus to bless us as we leave the familiar and trust in faith put to action that even the slogan, “Love Wins” is inaccurate because it presumes love can lose, and this is not the case. “Love Is” would be more faithful and realistic, taking the long view of history with trust in God’s creative power.

I have a poem by Jan Richardson that I’d like to close with as we come alongside Jesus in his journey into the unknown, as we share God’s love and receive blessings in ways we could not have anticipated, and as we remember James and the church throughout the ages dealing with similar struggles as we face our unique contexts. It’s a blessing, a prayer of release, a way to claim the moment while giving up control of the outcome, a trust of the journey, and openness to God’s lead, a willingness of heart. Trusting God’s love to speak to our hearts as we love God, love our neighbors, and love ourselves, grounded in the Christ-mystery and the Source of grace, here is...

This Day We Say Grateful
A Sending Blessing by Jan Richardson

It is a strange thing
to be so bound
and so released
all in the same moment,
to feel the heart
open wide
and wider still
even as it turns
to take its leave.

On this day,
let us say
this is simply the way
love moves
in its ceaseless spiraling,
turning us toward
one another,
then sending us
into what waits for us
with arms open wide to us
in welcome
and in hope.

On this day,
in this place
where you have
poured yourself out,
where you have been
emptied
and filled
and emptied again,
may you be aware
more than ever
of what your heart
has opened to
here,
what it has tended
and welcomed
here,
where it has broken
in love and in grief,
where it has given
and received blessing
in the unfathomable mystery
that moves us,
undoes us,
and remakes us
finally
for joy.

This day
may you know
this joy
in full measure.

This day
may you know
this blessing
that gathers you in
and sends you forth
but will not
forget you.

O hear us
as this day
we say
grace;
this day
we say
grateful;
this day
we say
blessing;
this day
we release you
in God's keeping
and hold you
in gladness
and love.

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