

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
James 2:14-17
9 Sep 2012

SGL
CCSN

Precious in God's Sight

We are precious in God's sight. All of creation is precious to our God. The first proverb shared today is a reminder of this. No matter who we are, what our social or financial standing, we are all part of God's fiercely beautiful creation. In the words of Ellen Davis, "The proverbs are spiritual guides for ordinary people, on an ordinary day, when water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come to lunch." (Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), p. 12.)

"The rich and poor have this in common, the Lord is the maker of them all." This is deeply layered wisdom for all of us common folks. I imagine this particular proverb influenced the faith of James, because for him, we are defined by our faith – not by wealth, or clothing, or social status. What the proverb hints at - Don't show favoritism; Look beyond the surface; - James yells out boldly. "Love your neighbor!"

We human creatures are funny beings. We begin life curious and basically accepting of all sorts of people. Just watch a toddler in a restaurant or a grocery store. They wave or say hi to everyone. As we reach our adolescent stage it becomes all about us and appearances are everything. Hopefully, somewhere in our development we become adults who see beyond the surface of others. I say hopefully because this simply isn't true of everyone. Some of us are excellent judges of character, others not so much.

I have to admit that often we clergy are guilty of judging by appearances. I had one friend of mine tell me: "If I see someone sneak into worship a bit late, I can tell by the way they are dressed whether they are a visitor or someone looking for assistance." It's a pretty jaded attitude. What I have found is that it dress and appearance have little to do with why a person comes through our doors and a whole lot more about what is in their heart and mind.

I don't know whether my dad would be honored or mortified to know that he gets cameos in my sermons. I have to share an appearance or perception story with you about my dad. Five days a week, for as long as I can remember, my father went off to work in a suit and tie – sometimes a three-piece suit. His shoes would be shined, teeth brushed, and he'd smell of, you guessed it, Old Spice. He was a regional sales manager for a small company, and he'd often travel for a week at a time. He was the kind of guy who'd hold the door for you, pull out a chair, and genuinely help someone out.

But Saturday mornings, it was as if he'd been possessed by a hobo. He'd have on pants with holes in the knees or splits in the seams. His sweatshirt would be faded, and usually holey or paint-stained. His toes would be poking out of his Dockers or sneakers. Now, this is fine for most of us working around the house, but Dad would go downtown like this. When I worked at the local A&P, Dad came through my checkout line occasionally. Once, there was a woman

behind him who only had a couple of things and he politely gestured she should go ahead of him. She was nice enough about it but when her back was to him, I could see the expression of distaste on her face. I'm not going to remark about her appearance, but suffice it to say she "dressed" just to go to the store.

My dad didn't know about my encounter and I didn't tell him either. You see, for him it never was about appearances. Maybe it came from growing up in tough times, but I think it was mostly about his faith and living it out. It occurs to me now, knowing my dad's sense of humor, that he very likely chose his most beat up clothes on those Saturdays partly to play a joke on people, and partly to never forget where he came from.

James said: "¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" The point is, pure faith and love show no favoritism. Our young people got excited about helping the people in Mexico and South Dakota not because they liked the way the children looked or whether they knew them. No, the children instinctively knew they needed to "supply the bodily needs" of their far-away neighbors. They knew this because of the atmosphere here in this place and in their homes that nurtures such a faith response in them.

Our mission team is leaving for Haiti in just a couple of weeks. They got excited to work and help out of an intrinsic faith response to the needs on that tiny, beleaguered island. You and I are motivated to reach out to others in countless ways – because somehow, somewhere, someone first reached out to us. It began long before our short life-spans, in the awesome, creative force of love that is our God. It continued in the gift of Jesus Christ who embodied compassion and solidarity with the poor and marginalized. We relate to Him because at some point in all our lives we've been on the sidelines, we've been in need, we've been taken advantage of. We've all needed a champion, a savior, who welcomed us in, and fed us and nurtured us, just because. Just because we are all precious in God's sight.