

“Moving Beyond Distinctions”

James 2:1-10, 14-17

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Last week, I was devastated by the news of the fire that gutted the eating establishment we know as O'Rourke's Diner in Middletown. There on the opposite corner when you cross over the bridge, the Diner drew me inside on hundreds of occasions. Though the bread was always fresh-baked on the premises, though the eggs always had that fluffy quality I appreciate; though the menu offered about eighteen pages of creative breakfast concoctions; the food was not the draw. At O'Rourke's Diner, there were no distinctions among the customers. On a given day, one booth would be occupied by a Wesleyan professor grading essays, another by a homeless man holding his coffee mug in his hands just to keep warm, another by a Spanish speaking family using the menu as a primer for practicing their English, another by motor cycle gang telling jokes and laughing from the belly, another by a clergy group plotting sermon strategies, another by a woman living with a bi-polar disorder, another by a guitar player tuning his instrument, another by an unemployed worker circling phone numbers in the want-ads.

I would walk into the Diner and instantly feel my heart rate slow down, feel the tension go out of my muscles, feel a smile coming over my mouth, and know that I had entered a 'no distinction' zone. That was the draw of O'Rourke's Diner. It was the kind of place where one would expect to find James stopping in for a cup of Joe and a slice of poppy seed cake. James is the disciple who saw the pain that comes whenever distinctions are made, whenever certain people are de-valued because of the clothes they wear while others are over-valued because of the garments they are able to afford.

It bothered James to no end that church leaders were welcoming Sunday visitors by sizing them up with an eye for brand names and celebrity labels. James is the disciple whose ecclesiology, whose understanding of the church, was centered on the great commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. Some people in his day thought of that commandment as a lesser add-on, an inferior amendment to the real commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all thy heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." But James saw it as of equal importance; to love thy neighbor as thy self. Thus, in his ecclesiology, there is no room for valuing people in any way other than that each is a child of God and therefore each is a sister or a brother. When one is in Christ, there can no longer be any distinctions. We are no longer categorized as Jew and Gentile, master and slave, male and female, gay and straight, left-handed and right-handed, athletic and klutzy, educated and uneducated, literate and ill-literate, long time member and first time visitor. We are all sisters and brothers. We are all in the 'no distinction zone.'

Earlier this summer, I had reason to journey out to the Cheyenne River Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota. I stopped in at the Sioux YMCA, where I am a trustee, to see the new deck that has been built with a grant from our South Church mission board. Several children were there playing jump rope. A young Lakota girl was twirling the rope on one end and a summer camp counselor who looked like she was about 20 and right off the boat from Norway was twirling at the other end. Children of various ages took turns jumping. I stood back and just took it all in until the little girl on the rope end said, "Hey Mister, wanna jump?" So, there we were, Indian and White, girls and boys, young and old, agile and not so agile, bobbing up and down like pistons in an internal combustion engine, having a really good time, oblivious, at least for a few moments, of any distinctions.

James paints a picture of a church that could be described as ‘counter-cultural,’ against the norm, contrary to the accepted practices of other local institutions. James envisions a church that sometimes stands in conflict with the surrounding culture, offering a different perspective.

Sometimes people ask me why I’m still at South Church. How come I haven’t moved on to greener pastures? I tell them it’s because South Church is a James Church, a church that isn’t afraid to ruffle feathers and go against the grain. Unlike the culture which still teaches men and boys not to cry; in this setting, tears are understood as an essential ingredient in being fully alive. Men can weep here and their manhood is not questioned. Unlike the culture which often favors men in leadership roles; in this setting, women chair boards and committees, preach sermons, baptize babies, change by-laws, teach Confirmation, and re-shingle roofs! Unlike the culture which often emphasizes getting ahead; in this setting, we emphasize getting together! Unlike the culture which often stresses how much we can take in; in this setting, disciples focus on how much we can give away! Unlike the culture which often sets up membership qualifications and dues meant to exclude; in this setting, the congregation throws open the doors and tears down the walls and decorates the welcome sign with neon lights! That is why this is still my church home!

I love driving along the highway on a vacation trip and seeing a sign that is mounted on a tower that seems to reach all the way to the sky. The sign has just one word on it. Eat! The sign says, “Eat!” I turn off the highway and eat. I eat until I am satisfied. It’s often a truck stop or a greasy spoon or a mom and pop café. The sign on the tower let’s me know I’ll be welcome there. These are not the chain restaurants where the menus are all the same and the employees wear the same uniforms and the pie crusts are all identical.

These places always have a blue plate special, a dessert you've never heard of, and songs on the juke box you can't find in your local store.

The Apostle James thought churches should be like that, having a tower outside with a one word description, a one word invitation, like 'eat'. We have four words on our tower, "God is still speaking." Could we shorten that to one word, one word that would cause all kinds of people to turn inside and see what God is doing? What would that one word be? "Eat?" "Commune?" "Sing?" "Surrender?" "Praise?" "Dance?" In a way, it doesn't really matter what the sign says. What matters is what one finds inside the building. Is it like the rest of the culture where distinctions are the order of the day, or is it a community that has moved beyond distinctions?

On this Homecoming Sunday, this is the question I wanted us to ponder. James is the one who lifts up the second commandment and places it side by side with the first. "Love your neighbor as yourself." In the greatest of hope, Amen!