

Just the Facts, Ma'am
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September 17, 2006
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

A few years ago on a Sunday morning, a man telephoned the First Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. It was an hour or so before worship and one of the ushers answered the phone. On the line was an advance person for one of the candidates for President of the United States who was campaigning in Raleigh over the weekend. The caller wanted to see if the church would be willing to have the candidate attend worship. I don't know which candidate this was but the advance man knew that First Presbyterian was a large church and its worship service was broadcast on the radio throughout eastern North Carolina. But the usher was a little flummoxed by this and all he could think of to say was that worship was at eleven o'clock and everyone was welcome.

The candidate did not come. The church heard later that the candidate's advance team was looking for a greater response from the church. They were looking for a little more favoritism. They wanted the candidate to be recognized by the preacher or asked to stand and acknowledge the greeting of the congregation or invited to come forward and say few words. "Worship is at eleven o'clock and everyone is welcome" wasn't quite enough. But the pastor was honest enough to admit later that if the call had come on Friday they would have been far more tempted to accommodate.¹

How tempting it is to honor the rich and famous and, on the other hand, dishonor the weak and poor. But as we continue now our reflections on the book of James, we will see that showing partiality or favoritism is sinful and it makes us morally no better than murderers or adulterers. In fact, disregarding the poor shows that our faith, regardless of what we think, is just plain dead. Let's read it in James 2.

James 2.1-17 (NRSV)

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? 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?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

¹ Rick Brand, "Respect For Wealth," *Lectionary Homiletics* 17.5 (2006): 54.

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Introduction

This dates me but so does the color of my hair and the lack thereof. When I was a kid my favorite television show was “Dragnet” starring Jack Webb (1920-1982) as Detective Sergeant Joe Friday. Dragnet actually began on radio in 1949, moved to television in 1951 (airing in both media until 1957). The show remained hugely popular even after being canceled in 1959. A feature film of Dragnet was made in 1954 and a made-for-television movie in 1966. That spawned a revival TV series in the late Sixties with Joe Friday’s partner, Bill Gannon, being played by actor Harry Morgan.²

A lot of Dragnet became firmly embedded in our pop culture idiom — things like “dum-de-dum-dum” — distinctive opening four notes of its theme music, or the characters’ rapid-fire, staccato delivery of dialogue, or the somber intonation of its prologue: “The story you are about to hear is true; the names have been changed to protect the innocent.” But perhaps most famous are two of Detective Sergeant Joe Friday’s lines. He always introduced himself by saying, “My name is Friday — I’m a cop.” And perhaps most famous of all, “Just the facts, ma’am.”

Except that’s not actually what Joe Friday said. What he actually said was “All we want are the facts, ma’am.” Or sometimes he said, “All we know are the facts, ma’am.” But Dragnet was satirized frequently and the satires altered and shortened Joe Friday’s line so often that “just the facts, ma’am” became what we remember whether or not the character actually said it.³

And years after Dragnet was on television people still use that line. When we want to get to point and when we tire of spin and obfuscation, we want to know the facts. Just the facts.

So a few weeks ago when I began to work on these sermons it struck me that James is a little like Joe Friday. He wants to know just the facts, ma’am, just the facts, sir. What are the facts of our faith? That’s the one question I want to ask this morning. What are the facts of our faith?

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Friday, Internet, 14 Sep. 2006. Dragnet used Joe Friday’s badge as its logo. When Jack Webb died in 1982, the Los Angeles Police Department retired Joe Friday’s shield number, which was 714, selected by Webb for the number of home runs hit by Babe Ruth.

³ See <http://www.snopes.com/radiotv/tv/dragnet.htm>, Internet, 13 Aug. 2006. So popular was Dragnet in its day that satirist Stan Freberg spoofed it on a 1953 record titled “St. George and the Dragonet.” This record with its flip side, “Little Blue Riding Hood” (also a Dragnet spoof) hit the #1 spot on Billboard’s pop chart and sold over two million copies. The record’s success prompted Ed Sullivan to invite Freberg to perform on his “Talk of the Town” variety show. Freberg’s “Little Blue Riding Hood” spoof changed the line slightly. Little Blue Riding Hood: “Why Grandma, what big ears you’ve got!” Sgt. Wednesday: “All the better to get the facts. I just want to get the facts, ma’am.” As this exchange entered the popular culture, it was soon truncated to “Just the facts, ma’am.” From that point on, every Webb interview and every newspaper and magazine article that had anything to do with Dragnet made use of the phrase.

What are the facts of our faith?

Let's think about it this way. If you and I were charged with being a Christian and Detective Sergeant Joe Friday came to interrogate us, and if he said to us "just the facts, ma'am" or "just the facts, sir" what would we say? Or to put it even more pointedly, if we were charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us? To be convicted for being a Christian we would have to have done what Jesus wants us to do. So it would not be about what we think or believe. It would be about the facts of what we do. Just the facts.

For James the facts begin with showing no partiality. In fact, it's not just about being impartial. It's about favoring the poor. This is because Christians must reflect God's radical acceptance of all. So to emphasize what is already emphatic, James repeats the commandment given by Jesus who was repeating the Old Testament: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

If there is sufficient evidence to convict us, the facts must point to actual ways we have served our neighbor in need, especially if our neighbor is poor. And remember that our neighbor isn't just the person who lives next door. Our neighbor is anyone in need who comes into contact with us. What are the facts of our faith? Have we served the neighbor?

Last Sunday I mentioned that Martin Luther famously called James an "epistle of straw" and wanted to throw it out of the Bible. Luther was the great champion of faith's power to save and he didn't like reading in James that faith without works is dead.

But a better reading of James reveals that Luther was not altogether fair because James had nothing against faith. He was just bothered by inauthentic faith. If we think we have faith but the faith we have makes no difference, then do we really have faith? James says "no!" We can hardly miss the point when he asks what good is faith that sees someone who is naked or hungry and doesn't do anything about it. James' sarcasm jumps off the page and smacks us upside the head. If we say to the naked and hungry "Peace, bro! Don't worry, be happy!" then our supposed faith is just deader than dead.

But why should we listen to this? James isn't fun. He pulls no punches. In fact, he can be downright offensive. If preachers say what James said without their listeners knowing that James said it first, a lot of churchgoers might find something else to do on Sunday mornings. So why pay attention to him?

Because James balances Paul. Christians are generally more familiar with Paul's theology. Preachers preach from Pauline texts much more than we do from James. We know that Paul championed faith — "We are saved by grace through faith." (Ephesians 2.8) We know that Paul insisted that we are not saved by obedience to the moral law. So we tend to have the mistaken belief that Christians have no commandments we are seriously expected to follow. Reading James overcomes that mistaken viewpoint.

The fact is, everywhere in the New Testament we find orders for our living. James has fifty-four imperatives for Christian life. But not just James. In the gospels, Jesus issues many commandments. Paul's letters also contain multitudinous ethical demands. Yes, we are saved by grace. Yes, we need faith to trust God's grace. But living under grace needs to make a practical, visible difference in our lives. Reading James helps us see that.

In today's text James has in mind several teachings from the Old Testament about the moral

law.⁴ The moral law says don't murder. It says don't commit adultery. It says love your neighbor as yourself (which Jesus said was the second great commandment⁵). Then James makes an amazing statement: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it." (2.10) Does he really mean that every petty, little offense makes us guilty of disobeying all of the moral law? Well, yes, because even petty breaking of moral laws indicates the direction of one's heart.

One commentator said she is reminded of those times when she has followed a car through the tollbooth on the interstate and watched the driver just pretend to throw money in the toll basket and then speed on through without paying. The driver has felt the need to pretend honesty, while in reality cheating on his fair share of highway tax. Such a little thing, really, a petty offense. But can such a person be trusted in bigger things? "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much," Jesus said, "and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much." (Luke 16.10) James knows that petty offenses are indicators of the heart.⁶

People who cheat at the tollbooth don't think they are guilty of murder or adultery. But James says they are and he says this to make us look again at the facts of our faith — just the facts. James says "mercy triumphs over judgment." (2.13b) But it does so only if in fact we practice mercy. It's not about how we think — it is easy to think mercifully. It's about how we actually live. Of course, this shouldn't surprise us because we pray it all the time. Jesus taught us to pray "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Do we want to be forgiven? Of course, we do. Then we need to forgive. Does God's mercy triumph over judgment? Of course, it does. But for it to triumph in us, we need to actually live mercifully.

John Chrysostom, a 4th century bishop and a brilliant preacher, commented on this text from James. He wrote, "Mercy is the highest art and the shield of those who practice it. It is the friend of God, standing always next to him and freely blessing whatever [God] wishes. It must not be despised by us. For in its purity it grants great liberty to those who respond to it in kind. It must be shown to those who have quarreled with us, as well as to those who have sinned against us, so great is its power. It breaks chains, dispels darkness, extinguishes fire, ... and takes away the gnashing of teeth. By [mercy] the gates of heaven open with the greatest of ease. In short, mercy is a queen which makes [us] like God."⁷ Do the facts of how we live show mercy?

⁴ "You shall not murder." (Exodus 20.13) "Neither shall you commit adultery." (Deuteronomy 5.18) "You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor." (Leviticus 19.15) "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19.18)

⁵ "And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22.39) "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12.31) "He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.'" (Luke 10.27).

⁶ Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Preaching the Lesson," *Lectionary Homiletics* 2.10 (1991): 21.

⁷ John Chrysostom (347-407) was a notable Christian bishop and preacher in Syria and Constantinople. He is famous for eloquence in public speaking and his denunciation of abuse of authority in the Church and in the Roman Empire of the time. After his death he was named Chrysostom, which comes from a Greek word meaning "golden mouthed," Gerald May, ed., "James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude," *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament, vol. XI (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 25.

Conclusion

If just the facts are sufficient to show that we are Christian, the facts will show that we do what is needed for those we encounter. I read recently about a rabbinic student named Shifra Penzias who tells about her great-aunt, Sussie, who rode a bus home one snowy evening in Munich of Nazi Germany. Suddenly, SS storm troopers stopped the coach and began examining the identification papers of the passengers. Most were annoyed but a few were terrified. Jews were being told to leave the bus and get into the truck around the corner.

Sussie watched from her seat in the rear as the soldiers systematically worked their way down the aisle. She began to tremble and tears streamed down her face. When the man next to her noticed that she was crying, he politely asked her why. “I don’t have the papers you have,” she said. “I am a Jew. They’re going to take me.”

The man exploded with disgust. He began to curse and scream at her. “You stupid (expletive deleted),” he roared. “I can’t stand being near you!”

The SS soldiers asked what all the yelling was about. “Damn her,” the man shouted angrily. “My wife has forgotten her papers again! I’m so fed up. She always does this!”

The soldiers laughed and moved on. Sussie never saw the man again. She never even knew his name.⁸ But he did what was right and even at risk to his own life he saved hers.

Maybe the facts of our faith will not be so dramatic. But may just the facts of how we live be enough to convict us of being Christian.

⁸ Lawrence Kushner, *Invisible Lines of Connection* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996) 81.