



**James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-30**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (September 8, 2024)**

Chief Seattle once said, “Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.”

True spirituality cannot turn a blind eye to the injustice in our world. We are all connected to one another and to the rest of creation. Turning a blind eye to the suffering of others, the pollution of the environment, and the struggle of animals to survive means ignoring our very humanity and despising the Creator who put all this together and gave us each a place in it.

Lack of compassion is significant of lack of gratitude which degenerates into lack of hospitality. We had better be warned against welcoming others only if there is something to gain.

The experience and practice of hospitality has deep roots in the Bible. It is more than entertaining guests. It reflects God’s love for all people. Anyone can do acts of hospitality, the outward dimension. But there is an inner dimension of hospitality that requires a change of heart.<sup>1</sup> As hosts, we are in the privileged spot of demonstrating the love of God.

An old Hebrew proverb notes that “hospitality to strangers is greater than reverence for the name of God.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 18:1-5; Is 58:7; Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 5:10; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9

<sup>2</sup> Robert E. Meagher as quoted by Steve Clapp, et al., *Deep & Wide: Hospitality and the Faithful Church*, p. 21.

Genuine hospitality is gratuitous, expecting nothing in return. A hidden and self-serving agenda, expecting something back from our calculated generosity, desecrates the gift of hospitality.

When that happens, we need to ask ourselves: What are we after? What do we worship? Achievement? Status? Possessions? What have we really understood of God? Indeed, what have we understood of ourselves? Who do we think we really are?

When I reduce human interactions to gain (what is in it for me?) and relationship with others and all in the environment as serving my purposes (what will I get out of it?), the world, which approached this way rotates around me, is the place where I can take what I think I am entitled to. I objectify the world and my relationships, and train myself to take as much as I can and more. This way, life is more than a transaction: life is what is owed to me. Force, even violence, becomes justifiable.

Colonizers are not guests. They are those who step onto somebody else's land with the intention to take over, to bully and to terrorize, to expropriate and to expel. They are confident of their superior power. Enslavers are not guests either. They are those who think they are a superior race and entitled to other people's bodies. Objectification leads to commercialization.

But violence happens even on a smaller scale when I pass a judgement on people according to how important I perceive them to be. I look at them with calculating eyes and assign them value based on the profit they can be to me.

This is what we see James lamenting in his letter to the churches: a disturbing discrimination based on people's economic means. Such a behavior is unbecoming of Christians. We ought to know better from Jesus' own pretty strict command:

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends...; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.<sup>3</sup>

The blessing, Jesus says, is in un-calculating, extravagant and reckless generosity!

James (2:5) reminds Christians that, according to Jesus, the poor are the recipients of God's blessings:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry, for you will be filled.<sup>4</sup>

The poor approach the Church with the hope that she is serious about living the Kingdom values. What a scandal when she is concerned only with herself! That concern is the result of fear for her own survival instead of trust in God's provisions.

So, James challenges the churches to explore and correct what is motivating their partiality. Seeking the favor of those of higher status is a misguided quest: powerful people are only after their own interests and are quick to use their connections in places of authority to achieve their own goals. Besides, they visibly blaspheme the name of the Lord who saves and sides with the poor.<sup>5</sup>

We are genuinely glad when guests join us for worship. We show interest in them as soon as they step in from the parking lot. They are greeted with warmth and smiles, and if they are here for the first time, they get a welcome bag with gifts and information about Nativity.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 14:12-14

<sup>4</sup> Lk 6:20-21

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 14:31; 21:13; 22:16; Psalm 14; 72:12-14; 82:1-4; Is 3:14; 10:1-2; 58:1-14; Jer 5:28

We don't make the mistake of judging them by their looks or sizes, clothes or hair color. We don't care if they are poor or rich and certainly don't ask if they are Republicans or Democrats. All are welcome.

I notice how attentive we are to making sure that they feel welcome and wanted. I hope the same reverence and care are extended to them afterwards in the fellowship hall when we go for refreshments. I hope they, our guests, are not left sitting alone while we chat away with the people we enjoy being with.

If we have been in any way unaware and distracted or selective and lazy, well, it's good we noticed. Let us commit to change our ways. It may happen that at times we are not well enough to push our boundaries and to walk toward our guests; or that we need to catch up with a friend; or that we are too self-conscious to strike a conversation with a perfect stranger. In that case, do not worry; it happened to Jesus, too. Remember today's gospel?

But by the grace of God, he learned and changed his way. In fact, did you notice there were no disciples around when he encountered the Syrophenician woman? How did Mark learn about the embarrassing event? Did the woman go around bragging that she made Jesus change his mind? Could it not be more plausible that Jesus understood how brilliant and precious that lesson was that he wanted to pass it on to his disciples, us?

May we learn generous hospitality. May the Spirit of Jesus move us from complacency and passive acceptance of cultural norms to the actualization of the Kingdom in our midst. Amen.