

Based on *James 2:1-5, 14-17. A Sibling of Jesus Insists Upon Radical Hospitality.

**Incarnational Translation Below*

Many years ago, just after I moved to upstate New York, I found myself strolling the streets of the Capital District in downtown Albany. A scuffle along the east side of the Capital building caught my attention.

In the midst of high profile politicians making their way to vote, government workers swimming through the cutthroat culture of New York's halls of power, and all-too-GQ businessmen and women rushing to make a deal, a disheveled man with dysentery found himself in the hands of local police. The stench of the excrement in which he lay offended even the most hardened city dweller. His struggle to stand on his own two feet broke even the most hardened New York heart.

It was a sad, desperate situation, with most passersby either too grossed out or too embarrassed to pay much attention. Including yours truly.

Just as I turned to walk away, out of the blue came the best-dressed man on the street, wearing spit-shined Versace loafers, a very well-tailored Ralph Lauren suit, and a Gucci matching scarf and glove set, rushing toward the man we all wanted to avoid. The Gucci-man rushed past the police, sank down on one knee, right there in the muck of the poor man's mess, stuck out his hand – to everyone's shock – and said, "Hello. My name is Jason. I am an alcoholic."

In an instant, the man on the ground grabbed tight to Jason's hand. Trembling from head to toe, he slowly but emphatically made his way to his feet. With great effort, he lifted his head, looked Jason straight in the eye, and said, "My name is Charles. I am an alcoholic, too."

Jason took off his coat and wrapped Charles tightly in it. Jason told the police he would assume responsibility for Charles for the remainder of the day. After making a few calls to clear his schedule, Jason booked a room for Charles, under Jason's own presumably well-respected name, in the ritzy Renaissance Albany Hotel next door, where Charles could bathe and rest and eat.

It was a wonder to behold. The rest of the story is known only to Jason and Charles and the One they choose to call Higher Power, whom we choose to call "God."

Active Agape, we would call this moment of grace, in the language of The Letter of James for today. Walking the Way of Jesus, with dignity, with *honor*, across that reprehensible divide between *the haves* and *the have nots*. Radical Hospitality at its most basic, which says *not*, "there but for the grace of God, go I," but rather, "there *because* of the grace of God, I am compelled to go."

The truth is, as Jason and Charles bore witness that day, there is something of the disheveled man soaking in his own dysentery within all of us. If there is anything I have learned in the ministry, it is this: we cannot tell *one thing* about what is really going on inside a person's soul by the way that person presents themselves publicly. The Gucci-man can be just as alcoholic as the shabbily dressed man on the street. The lawyer who lost his high profile job can be just as panicked about a paycheck as the single mom desperate to make ends meet. The

streetwalker with PTSD from the assault of a client can be just as traumatized as the hero from 9/11 who watched the towers fall upon his friends.

The truth is, we cannot tell *one thing* about what is really going on inside a person's soul by the way that person's presents themselves publicly.

At the same time, we know the experience of addiction, the spiral of depression, the agony of trauma triggers are made exponentially worse when they are paired with poverty. This is why, throughout the Scriptures, God insists upon a radical call to unconditional justice wherever the economic gap between poverty and wealth is great. Old Testament commandments protecting the poor and the alien – who hold pride of place in these texts – are among the oldest in the Bible. A full ten percent of the Gospel texts refer specifically to economic and social justice. Even the enemies of Jesus observe that he does not choose riches but instead hangs out with the poor and outcast. When Jesus says, “the last shall be first and the first shall be last,” he is talking about Charles and Jason. He is talking about you and me.

Liberation theologians describe this trajectory of the Bible as bearing witness to “God's preferential option for the poor.” Which emphatically does *not* mean that God's steadfast love is limited only to one side of the divide between *the haves* and *the have nots*. God's steadfast love endures forever ... for *everyone!*

The biblical tradition of God's preferential option for the poor *does* mean, as The Letter of James says outright, and not just in my own translation, that God has taken sides in a divide that is truly scandalous to the gospel: *the side of the poor!* In fact, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible explicitly calls this economic divide between *the haves* and *the have nots* “evil.”

And so must the church. We simply cannot practice The Way of Jesus, as much as we may say we want to, if one of our siblings lacks basic necessities – food, clothing, shelter, community, health insurance – but we say, “Don't worry, God will keep you warm and fed,” while we do nothing to ensure those basic needs are met. The job of the church is to live in solidarity with the world's social outcasts, not perpetuate the divide that casts them out!

The challenge, I know, is that joining Jesus on the other side of that divide – joining God on the other side of that divide – requires us to confront our all too human fear: that we will make mistakes as we try to bridge that divide and have to confront the parts of ourselves we would rather keep hidden under our public persona; that bridging the economic divide might cost us our own wealth we have worked so hard to build; that bridging the economic divide might force us into an advocacy in the public square that feels uncomfortably “political” in our hyper-partisan era. Even when this advocacy is a proclamation of the gospel, and not at all a perpetuation of partisanship

Believe me, I get. I live these fears, too. The good news is, as the author of another Letter – attributed to John – reminds us: *Active Agape* can cast out our fear! When we earnestly, with humility, with grace, with commitment, follow that Second Commandment – to love our neighbor as ourselves, I promise you, these fears all fall away, and all that matters is the well-being of the struggling sibling who mirrors our own struggles.

The Letter of James is right, my friends. Concrete, specific actions, taken for love of God and love of neighbor – even if that neighbor is soaked in his own excrement – *can* save our souls, as well as our lives. It sure did that

cold day in Albany when Jason welcomed Charles into his communion of saints, and Jason returned the welcome, as well. For them. And for all of us lucky enough to watch.

Let the church say, Amen!

An *Incarnational Translation of James 2:1-5, 14-17

From a sibling of Jesus
To all people everywhere
who strive to walk The Way of Jesus

Beloveds,
Remember to walk the Way of Jesus honorably,
not by playing favorites among God's beloved children.

For example, if a movie star decked out in finery and jewels
parades into one of our communities,
and at the same time a shabbily dressed addict comes in off the street,
and the congregation explodes with delight over the celebrity,
but ignores – or even worse, throws out in judgment – the shabbily dressed addict,
then we have exacerbated the reprehensible division of humanity
into *the haves* and *the have nots*.

Don't forget:
God has taken sides in that divide:
for the poor!

The shabbily dressed addict gathering up the courage
to come on a Sunday morning
shows much greater faith in God
than the well-dressed movie star who expects to be respected.
The addict has to learn already in his bones
that the reign of God requires *Active Agape*.

Beloveds,
we cannot practice The Way of Jesus
if one of our siblings lacks basic necessities –
food, clothing, shelter, community, health insurance –
but we say, "Don't worry, God will keep you warm and fed,"
while we do nothing to ensure those basic needs are met.

Truly, The Way of Jesus without *active agape*
is a lifeless corpse left to rot.

But even then, Beloveds,
there is still good news!
Even if we have wandered
from The Way of Jesus
we can be brought back by
reclaiming our commitment to *Active Agape*.

Active Agape will save our soul!

*"Incarnational translation for preaching seeks to recontextualize biblical texts so that they say and do in new times and places something like what they said and did in ancient times and places" (Cosgrove and Edgerton, ***In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching***, 62).