

**James 2: 1-17**  
**Mark 7: 24-37**  
**September 9, 2012**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**

The texts this morning issue many challenges. But for me the most important challenge is this: Who the “me” who hears and is confronted by these stories? Who is the Stewart who the Word of God addresses? Having asked this of myself I now ask you to join me in the same reflection: Who is the “you” who hears and is confronted by these stories?

Make no mistake. These scriptures are at the very heart *confrontational*. They are not meant to make us feel good. They are meant to bring us up short. They are meant to bring to light our complacency and sense of false security. They are meant to stand us in the light of God’s compassion and God’s justice.

The good news is that in confronting us, these texts give us credit for some spiritual maturity. It is a quality of maturity that we are aware that we are not spiritually perfect. It is a quality of spiritual maturity that we are humbled by how far short of God’s vision we are as individuals and as a community of faith. Yet it is also a sign of spiritual maturity that we yearn to grow and become more and more a true embodiment of Jesus Christ in this community.

James assumes that his hearers will receive the message which confronts them with their hearty welcome to the apparently wealthy and their equally cold and discouraging response to the apparently poor. He assumes that they will be moved to recognize the truth and to repent. He assumes that they will come to recognize and honor the full humanity of all people regardless of their appearance and visible distinctions. He assumes that as a result of his spiritual rebuke this community will embark on a journey of living out the reality that every human being is a child of God and that God makes no distinctions of value. James trusts that as a result of his direct approach new life and witness will flourish from this currently smug congregation which adopts the worldly values of the day and shows little evidence of the living spirit of the resurrected Christ.

Are we mature enough to receive and grow from this message? Where does this text confront us as individuals and as a community of faith?

No less confrontational is the passage from Mark concerning the encounter between Jesus and the mother of the demon possessed child. Who is it who is being confronted? It is not Jesus challenging this woman with her sins. Instead it is the woman who confronts Jesus with his hard hearted and judgmental attitude. It is Jesus who is rebuked for limiting God's healing to the chosen and the worthy. It is the woman who has the courage and character to bypass Jesus' brutal insult and demand that he reclaim his true mission: to be the love that God sent to the whole world in and through him.

Who are we who hear *this* story? How are we addressed?

I will not presume to know how each of you responds to James and this episode recorded by Mark. We may identify with the poor who experience in the Christian Church a double standard which announces on nearly every sign "All are Welcome"; yet who experience the reality that in every congregation some are more welcome than others. Maybe you identify with the woman who is given the cold shoulder by Jesus and yet demands that he rise to the practice of his own preaching.

Or you and we together may become defensive at the hearing of these scriptures. We may say, "Hey. I am doing my best! Cut me some slack!" We may say, "We are imperfect and cannot be expected to do any better." We may even say respond by saying to James and to the mother of the critically ill child, "Who are you to be demanding anything of me? What have you done to help yourself? Maybe your child's trouble is your own fault!" Maybe we say to James, "Look, it is easy to judge us. But we have a hard time telling the difference between the worthy poor and the slackers who are just lazy. Why wouldn't we welcome someone who is able to help stabilize our finances and help us continue our ministry?"

Truthfully, I have all of these reactions. But in the midst of them all I hear God's quiet and expectant silence. The message remains whether I like it or not or whether I like the messenger or not. And in the end the question is the same. Who is the "me" who hears and is confronted by these

scriptures? Who is the you? Most important: Who are the “we” who are considered spiritually mature enough to receive this message?

I suggest that one way to gain insight into this query is this: Where are we in relation to the message? I do not mean by this are we rich or poor, in or out, confronter or confronted. Instead I propose that you imagine yourself in the congregation which first heard and was confronted by the letter of James. How do the words affect you: “Brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?”

Ouch! Of course I believe! If I didn’t would I be here? Who are you to judge me? Do you know how hard I work? It is not easy to make time to come here. Rather than scolding me you should be comforting me and making me feel appreciated!

Where are you as you hear and respond? When I articulated these words I was towering high over James full of righteous fury. My object was to so overwhelm you with my indignation that you would cower before me and say, “I am so sorry! I had no idea you were so generous and faithful. My message wasn’t meant for you but for those other people—those other churches!”

Of course there is another response. It is, “You are so right! I am just a miserable worm. I have no right to be in this assembly. I will always be a wretched elitist snob, an unchristian hardhearted selfish grasping soul who doesn’t deserve your attention.”

When I articulated these words I was far below the messenger, helpless and hopeless. My only desire was to crawl away and never come back.

In the first case I am towering high over a cringing pitiful creature. In the other I am the cringing pitiful creature.

So much of Christian preaching seems to aim at eliciting this second response. We are meant to be confronted by the vastness of God’s greatness and our puny insignificance. We are meant to enter what Douglas Adams in [The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy](#) called “the total perspective vortex and have our ego and self image completely destroyed and then rebuilt from the ground up. We are meant

to say with Job in response to God's crushing response to his complaint, "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

Sometimes we do need to be spiritually right sized by a spiritual baseball bat from God—but, I insist *only from God*.

But there is a third response. It is modeled by the woman whose daughter seems beyond all help. Jesus' response would place him high above. His words are brutal and humiliating. She is meant to cower like the beaten dog he tells her she is and to slink away utterly broken in spirit. But she does not.

Instead she meets Jesus face to face and eye to eye. She calmly responds to his rejection. She does not argue with him or confront him with his arrogant and elitist attitude. She concedes that as a gentile she and her daughter are in Jewish eyes mere dogs. "Yet," she observes, "even dogs eat the crumbs from under the children's table."

She in no way denies that Jesus is a divine healer. She simply insists that she be treated as a human being with respect and compassion. In effect, by refusing to grovel or leave in shame, she holds her ground. She demands that Jesus come down off his high throne of judgment and meet her where she is: face to face, eye to eye.

For me the good news of this story is not that the daughter is healed. The wonderful news is that Jesus the high King of heaven once again descends to earth and meets the woman where she is. Jesus becomes human.

Friends this morning I suggest that we ride a spiritual and emotional roller coaster where we are either towering over people in judgment or cringing beneath them in shame and embarrassment. To do this is to miss the purpose of being disciples of Christ. We are called to rise with Christ from the depths of our guilt and shame and we are called to descend from our place of heavenly judgment to be Jesus who seeks to meet all people with love and hope where they are: face to face, eye to eye, heart to heart. Amen.