

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**James 2: 1-13**  
**“No Partiality”**  
**16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**September 13, 2015**

It would be difficult to read any book in the New Testament and fail to see that what is written there is calling followers of Jesus to erase whatever lines that society draws in the sand in order to divide people into “us” and “them,” to meet the needs of neighbors who live on the margins, and to devote their best energies to creating and nurturing community. In other words, those who walk in the way of Jesus are not just to hear and believe, they are to be *doers* of God’s word.

This notion has come through loud and clear as we have read from the first chapter of the New Testament book of James over the course of the past two Sundays. Listen for the theme as we read again from James, this time from the second chapter, verses 1-17.

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James and the congregation to whom he was writing were living in a world of hurt. The economic disparity between rich and poor had migrated from the world outside into the church itself. Two visitors are depicted as entering the Christian assembly. One of them is bejeweled, the other is bedraggled. Mr. Bejeweled enters, and he is warmly welcomed. “Come, sit here,” he is invited. Ms. Bedraggled, on the other hand, is brusquely brushed aside. “Sit over there,” “sit at my feet,” she is told.

But that was then, and now is now. The Bible was written a long time ago, and the world has changed.  
Right?

Well, no.

Here is the latest September/October issue of our PCUSA denominational magazine, *Presbyterians Today*. The dramatic cover, with big, bold, red and white letters on a black background, screams OUR HURTING WORLD. According to the editor, it is the biggest issue ever.

We are in a world of hurt.

Sometimes the church’s response to the world’s hurt is to put our collective shoulders to the door of the church and lean our full weight against the door to keep the hurt of the world at bay. Rich Stearns, whose book, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, we read as an all-congregation read a few years ago, recently blogged that it would have been better for the Syrian people had they suffered a tsunami, an earthquake, or a hurricane. The fighting in Syria has devastated an entire country of 20 million people and created the greatest refugee crisis since World War II. According to Stearns, Syria’s 12 million people in need of assistance is a number more than twice as large as the number of people affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami, the Haiti earthquake, and Hurricane Katrina combined. Americans responded to the Haiti earthquake by contributing \$36 million to World Vision in the year following the disaster, \$5.9 million during the first week. World Vision has collected only \$2.7 million over the course of *four* years for Syria. (1)

Well, here we are, disciples of Jesus Christ, living in a world of hurt, a world divided as James’s world was by economic disparity, called by James to be doers of the word and telling us that our faith, if it has no works, is dead.

This world of hurt in which we live...It’s so big. It’s so much. What in the world can we do?

One answer is NOTHING.

David LaMotte, writing in the same issue of *Presbyterians Today*, makes a convincing case for the reason that we are sometimes immobilized in the face of the world’s hurt is that we have bought into what he, borrowing from Paul Loeb’s book *Soul of a Citizen*, deems the hero narrative. (2)

The essence of the narrative is distilled for us in “the western,” the saga of the frontier and the men who allegedly subdued it. The western may appear as a play, a novel, a movie, or a television drama. But one theme runs through all of its forms, i.e., the impotence of social order and the reliance of the community upon the courage of the lonely hero.

A typical western, whether it takes place in the American Southwest or in a futuristic dystopian environment where it is often set today, begins with some town in trouble. The bad guys who were sent to prison a few years ago have been released and are about to descend upon those who put them away. A hostile tribe is in the vicinity and out for blood. Trail-weary cowboys have had too much to drink and are planning to burn down the main street. The threats vary, but the response of the town is constant. It trembles helplessly before whatever impends. Those who should organize its resources and direct its defense are unavailable or unwilling to lead. The sheriff is a coward; the cavalry has been called into the hills by false smoke signals; the banker is hiding in the vault with his money bags; and the preacher is at home preparing a dramatic sermon on infant damnation. The “danger music” grows louder, and all seems lost.

Then at the critical moment a lonely figure appears at one end of the long, dusty, main street of town. He ties his horse in front of the saloon, slaps some of the alkali from his clothes, and steps up the bar for a drink. He has no intention whatever of getting involved in this community. But something catches his eye. Perhaps a small boy looks trustingly into his face or one of the saloon girls reminds him of his sister. And before he knows it, he has agreed to get the town out of whatever trouble it fears.

His method of operation is also standard. He rarely makes any effort to organize the citizenry in their own defense. Such an undertaking would clearly be doomed at the outset. He simply warns innocent bystanders to get out of the way, meets the enemy in the middle of the street, guns him down, then goes on with his interrupted journey. (3)

David LaMotte is convinced that the hero narrative works to shut down our impulse to work for the healing of a world of hurt, to erase the lines in the sand that society draws, to care for those who live on the margins. There is somebody else out there, we tell ourselves, who will take care of the world’s hurt for us.

James offers an alternative...and a truer...narrative. It is this: things change on a large scale when a lot of people—individuals who are engaged as a community—make a little bit of effort in the same direction.

We don’t know how the scenario of Mr. Bejeweled and Ms. Bedraggled played out. James doesn’t tell us this.

But this is the way that I imagine it.

An usher noticed Ms. Bedraggled. He went to her and said, “We are so glad that you are here today.” A fellow worshiper made her way over and said, “Please come and sit by me.” And when the peace of Christ was passed, Mr. Bejeweled and Ms. Bedraggled shook hands. They shared the peace of Christ. And after worship, Mr. Bejeweled turned to Ms. Bedraggled and said, “I’m planning to go the deli across the street for lunch. I would love for you to join me.” And Mr. Bejeweled and Ms. Bedraggled began to recognize the truth about themselves, that is, that they are brothers and sisters in the Lord.

James doesn’t tell us if any of this ever happened. But he is holding out a vision of a world where it does happen. Where people do small things and lives are changed.

I believe that it could have happened just this way.

Why?

Because I have seen something similar happen right here at Davidson College Presbyterian Church.

Do you remember when Russ Kerr led worship a couple of Sundays ago? Do you remember his prayer that he prayed on that weekend of the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina?

He prayed for someone whose name is Rhonda and her two sons, alluding to the fact that Davidson College Presbyterian Church had housed her following the evacuation of New Orleans.

I am in my eighth year as pastor here, and I had never heard of this church’s ministry to Rhonda, so I phoned Russ to get more information. He told me about her...that she had been housed in DCPC homes for a few weeks. I also learned that Davidson Housing Coalition had found her a place to live for a few months. The following year, there was a DCPC mission trip to New Orleans. Russ participated in the mission trip. Rhonda was back in New Orleans, and she met the group from this church and toured them around her decimated neighborhood in the Lower Ninth Ward. Russ has not had any contact with Rhonda since the summer of 2006, but he has thought about her every time he has read about the rebuilding of the Lower Ninth Ward. The neighborhood has become gentrified, and Russ continues to wrestle with the disparity between rich and poor and how the church is to be a doer of the Word and not merely a hearer and believer in the midst of economic disparity, and this, in part, is what has led him to seminary, Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA, where he begins classes tomorrow.

I conclude this sermon with two things.

The first is an invitation to do your small part in ministering to the millions of suffering Syrian refugees. Send \$5, \$10, \$50 to one of the agencies involved in humanitarian relief. I strongly recommend the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Program which is working with our partner churches in Hungary. You can write a check to DCPC, marking it "Syria," or place some cash in an envelope with the same notation. You can also give directly to PDA through their website.

The second is a blessing. It comes via Eugenia Gamble who says that she is pretty sure that it was originally a Franciscan blessing:

***May God bless you with discomfort  
with easy answers and half truths and superficial relationships,  
so that you will live deeply  
and from the heart.  
And may God bless you with anger  
at injustice, oppression, and the exploitation of people,  
so that you will work  
for justice, freedom and peace.  
And may God bless you with tears to shed  
for those that mourn,  
so you will reach out your hand to them  
and turn mourning into joy.  
And may God bless you with just enough foolishness  
to believe that you can make a difference in this world,  
so that you will do those things that others say  
cannot be done.***

1. Richard Stearns, "Why Syria needs an earthquake: Americans are ignoring the greatest humanitarian crisis in decades," [www.beyond5.org](http://www.beyond5.org), September 11, 2015.
2. David LaMotte, "Healing a hurting world: How to be a positive force for change without being a hero," *Presbyterians Today*, September/October 2015, 22.
3. William Muehl, *All the Damned Angels* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1972), 64-65.