

Holy Bible, Holy Church?

James 2:1-10; 14-17

Delivered Sunday, September 6, 2009

True story: You know Jim Wallis, the founder and editor of the religious journal, Sojourner Magazine? Jim Wallis has shared that in college he and some of his college buds did a thorough Bible study on the issues of poverty and social injustice. They actually went through every book in the New Testament looking for verses bearing directly on these two issues. You know what these college students discovered? In the first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, ONE out of every TEN verses is devoted to the imbalance between the rich and the poor. If you take Luke all by itself, it's ONE out of every SEVEN verses. That was enough to inspire them to delve deeper. A person in the group brought an old Bible to one of their subsequent meetings. Wallis' college buds took turns going through that entire old, Bible, both Old and New Testaments, cutting out all the passages that had to do with poverty and the consequent social imbalances between the rich and the poor. Psalms and Proverbs virtually disappeared. When they were done, they had one very holy Bible—and by that I mean a bible with holes in it—Swiss cheese holy.

The book of James was definitely one of those books, besides Psalms and Proverbs that almost disappeared. That is because the author of the Book of James was extremely concerned with the financial and social discrimination that was prevalent in the early Christian church. James even gives us an illustration—it sounds like he must have made it up, it is so in-your-face discriminatory: A man in fine clothes and gold jewelry struts into church and is given a place of honor. Then a poor person in dirty, worn clothes comes in and is made to sit on the floor. What?! The fact that James tells this story, though, makes us wonder if there were at least some churches in James' day that were practicing a Swiss cheese holy kind of Christianity.

That scene seems far from the reality of Cove, doesn't it? I mean I am proud of us. As far as I'm aware we don't make a distinction in worship or in our church lives between the have mores and the have lesses. Maybe that's because so many of us have experienced hardships ourselves. I know your stories. Not one of us sitting here today has had an easy life. Then too, so many of us have jobs in the caring professions. By nature, we are, as a group, a very sympathetic, empathic lot.

Still, this week, I tried to imagine what would happen if someone who is of national importance, say our President, Barack Obama, came to worship with us? As far as I know the first family has still not found a church home, so why not Cove? I mean, I know "Why not Cove,"-- there's a three hour drive between Cove and the White House, still, if we put aside the distance issue, why NOT Cove? This week, I spent some time actually imagining how the first family's presence here would actually play out. See if this isn't true to us.

First, of course, I'd get that very special phone call from Washington. It seems that Governor Kaine has told his friend, the President, what a good thing we have going

here. The President wants to see it for himself. The person from the Washington Office talks with me about press (The President wants none) and parking for the President's entourage—they will have the premier parking spaces along the driveway. We discuss timing. Eight members of the secret service will arrive early. The other five will arrive with the first family at 5 minutes before eleven.

The first thing I do, of course, is notify our Session. We are excited by the news. I stress that the word is mum, since this is not to be a press or photo op; but of course, the husbands on Session tell their wives and the wives on Session tell their husbands. Sons and daughters, and best friends are notified, too. Suffice it to say, with the secret service here, and the people who have heard the news via the grapevine, we have DOUBLE the attendance of a normal Sunday. Cars line Covesville Lane. Cars are parked in Don Cecil's park.

Everyone is wearing their very best clothes—John Evans actually wears a suit; so does Chris Hill.

It's a Communion Sunday, just like today. Anticipating a crowd, I have borrowed extra communion ware from Westminster Presbyterian. It's all freshly polished. Your pastor is so nervous she mumbles and stutters her way through the sermon—or better maybe, she mumbles and stutters even more than usual, through her sermon. During communion her hands shake so much that she drops the bread on top of the communion trays spilling both wine and juice.

The choir prepares a very special song and they sing a lovely prelude and postlude, too. Linda Blondel plays a superb offertory.

After worship, we have our normal fellowship hour—except that it is not all that normal. Jody has thought ahead. She has borrowed extra coffee urns from Covesville Baptist for the anticipated crowd. She's also made her best-ever muffins. These are supplemented by ham biscuits compliments of the Lindbecks and corn bread complements of the Molendas.

Karen Levering contributes her linens for the picnic table.

At the end of the day, after every one is gone, except those cleaning up from the Fellowship Hour, we admit that we are exhausted but we are also feeling very privileged and well, special, to be among greatness. James Burnley asks about an elderly woman who came in late, alone, and sat next to him. He'd never seen her before. "Did anyone get her name?" he asks. No one knows who he is talking about. We admit that we were all too busy, ogling the first family. Wasn't Michelle's dress lovely? And the girls, weren't they CUTE?

Fast forward – The President has decided to make Cove his church home. The first family has been worshipping with us for the past three months. Ok. Now here I realize that the Obamas would probably never make the six hour trip from DC to

Covesville and back, every Sunday. Minor detail. I ask you to suspend your disbelief for just a few more minutes.

In three months, parking has become a REAL problem. Don Cecil's park is Cove's new parking lot. The plants are gone, the grass is gone. Good news is, Richard Napier doesn't have to mow anymore.

Jody has a nervous breakdown. She was in the kitchen making her fifth urn of coffee on a Sunday morning. She just suddenly burst out crying and couldn't stop. She stopped coming to church—she quit her job, too. We pray for Jody in worship every Sunday.

Your pastor is basking in the limelight. She is now officially, "The President's pastor." She is spending a lot of her time speaking to clergy groups. She has been invited to preach at a Presbytery meeting.

The Covesville Child Development Center has been given notice. They must vacate Cove Hall to make room for a new parlor, which will take up the entire second floor. We need room for the secret service and our new visitors. The visitors, of course, come on Sunday to have that one brush with greatness—a handshake with President Obama.

The food program has had to go, too. No room to collect food items since the narthex is full of people on Sunday morning. Then, too, who has time to drop food off at the food bank?

With so many people on Sunday, the balcony is getting a lot of use, so much so that Walt Levering is worried that it's only a matter of time before it collapses. He has called in an engineer to get an estimate on costs for upgrades, which we can easily afford. The offering plates literally overflow on Sundays.

Speaking of money, Estelle, our treasurer, is happy, happy, happy!. No stewardship speeches this year!

Cove Church now offers two Sunday services—if you are lucky, you might get to see the President at one of them. The Worship Committee is talking about adding a third service.

John and Chris buy NEW suits.

The elderly woman who sat in the back pew the first Sunday the Obama family visited with us? She never showed up again; which, really, is just fine with us.

The author of our text for today, James, says this: "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?"

In three months, believe it, Cove too could become a Swiss cheese holy church.
Amen