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James

How do you make judgments on individuals based on their outward appearance? Notice, I was very deliberate in my wording. Not do you? But how? For I think if we were all honest with ourselves, we would admit that we have all judged someone by how they look.

Research shows that clean clothing, grooming, and professional wear lead observers to assume higher intelligence or job skill. People experiencing homelessness are often judged through stereotypes—that they are unwilling to work, struggling with addiction, dangerous, or responsible for their circumstances—while the realities of housing scarcity, poverty, trauma, illness, and other circumstances are often overlooked

Eugene Arcand was 5 years old when he was removed from his family at Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, taken to St. Michael's Residential School. His name was taken from him, his hair cut, told to strip and stand in the cold water coming from a hose for a shower, and told to drip dry. His language was discouraged, separated from his family, culture and community. For 11 years he faced physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse, hunger, fear, and the constant need to survive.

He says, " I saw some of the big boys getting fed properly, differently. I found later they were members of the soccer team. They were being groomed to play in high school competitions that fall. I saw that the athletes there were getting preferential treatment. I wanted that, too."

In 1973, a 6-year old girl named Phyllis, was excited and nervous to attend school for the very first time. Her grandmother used the limited money she had to buy her a bright, shiny, and sparkling new outfit. Phyllis said her shirt had string laced up in the front and was so bright and exciting - just how she felt to be going to school. When Phyllis arrived to school that first day she was stripped, her clothes taken away, never to be worn again. Kids all around her were crying and she felt like no one cared.

These are not simply stories that happened somewhere else in Canada. This is part of the story of the place where we live. More than 4,000 children have now been identified as having died within the residential school system, and research continues to identify others. Many children were buried far from their families, including in unmarked graves.

The words from James this morning warns the church not to create insiders and outsiders.

James 2:1-4, "My brothers and sisters, believers in our

glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"

The term favoritism here comes from the Greek word meaning "receiving the face." To "receive the face" means to make judgments about people based on external appearance. While James uses this to talk about differences in dress for social/economical situations the Greek word is plural, making it clear that this prohibition of favoritism has wide-ranging application.

Hear James 2:1 from the Common English translation, "My brothers and sisters, when you show favoritism you deny the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory."

James is very clear; discriminating against people is inconsistent with true faith in Christ. We are not to determine a person's worth, dignity, or place among us based on external factors—whether clothing, skin colour, social position, physical appearance, background, or circumstance. God is impartial, looking

to the heart, rather than the outside appearance, and we are to do the same. As Moses stated to the Israelites, Deuteronomy 10:17–18 “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.”

Phyllis, from the story at the beginning, attended the St Joseph Mission Indian Residential School. It was a bright Orange shirt that her grandmother had bought her, to never be seen again. She says, “The color orange has always reminded me of that and how my feelings didn’t matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing.”

But Phyllis was never worthless. The institution could take her shirt. It could cut her hair. It could attempt to take her language and culture. But it could never take the image of God that was already stamped upon her life. Her story shapes the orange shirt campaign around the day of Truth and Reconciliation, which happens on September 30th, this coming Wednesday.

We are living in Mi’kma’ki, the traditional and unceded territory of the Mi’kmaq people. And just outside of Shubenacadie stood the only residential school in the Maritime provinces. Mi’kmaw and Wolastoqiyik children were taken there, and the school became

part of the same system that sought to separate Indigenous children from their families, suppress their languages and cultures, and assimilate them. That means when we talk about Truth and Reconciliation here, we are not talking about someone else's history. This is part of the history of the land on which we live. And for us as Christians, there is another uncomfortable truth: churches were not simply observers of this history. Christian churches were involved in administering residential schools, and that history includes denominations other than our own. But our own Baptist history also requires us to ask what we did—and what we failed to do—in the face of this injustice. So when we hear James say, "Do not show favoritism," we cannot hear those words only as an abstract lesson about being nice to people. We have to let it examine us.

What happens when we decide that our culture is better than someone else's? What happens when we assume that our language is more important? What happens when we believe that our way of worshipping, learning, living, or raising children should replace someone else's? What happens when we become so convinced that we know what is best for another person that we stop listening to them?

That is part of the truth we are being asked to face. "What does Orange Shirt Day have to do with

faith?" James answers clearly: when any people are dishonoured or pushed aside, the church must pay attention. This day reminds us what happens when a society decides some children, languages, cultures, and people matter less than others. And while we may say we weren't part of it, we are called to examine the ways favoritism, prejudice, and assumptions about the worth of others can show up in our own hearts and communities.

I hear so much about the homeless situation in Kentville and about the desire to move people away from the town centre. I hear the assumptions: they don't want to work, they're addicts, they're dangerous, they're a menace to society. But I rarely hear the first thing James would have us remember: they are people made in the image of God. They are our neighbours.

I don't know their stories. I don't know what they've endured, what they've lost, what systems have failed them, or what choices they have made—or what choices they believed they had. I don't know what brought them to where they are. But I do know this: God created them. God sees them. And God calls us to see them.

That doesn't mean homelessness is simple. It isn't. There are real concerns about addiction, mental illness, safety, housing, public spaces, and how communities respond to people who are struggling. We can disagree

about what should be done. But James calls us to remember the person before the problem.

That person is not first a homeless person, an addict, a nuisance, or a problem to be moved somewhere else. They are a person. They bear the image of God. And we can disagree about solutions without treating another human being as though their life has less value than ours.

Truth and Reconciliation reminds us of the devastating consequences that can come when a society decides that some people matter less than others. James reminds us that the people sitting in front of us, standing beside us, and living on the margins of our communities are not categories or problems. They are our neighbours. And if they are made by God, seen by God, and loved by God, then perhaps the question for us is not simply, "What should we do about them?" but, "How is God calling us to see them?"

We may not have built the residential schools, but we can still ask ourselves whether we ever allow differences in culture, language, background, or circumstance to shape how we see or value another person. Or how has our silence continued prejudice towards a group of people? The residential school system was shaped by a belief in the superiority of one culture and the inferiority of Indigenous cultures, and by policies intended to separate Indigenous children from their

families, languages, and communities. James gives us a theological category for confronting that kind of thinking: favoritism and partiality have no place among people who claim the name of Christ.

In 2016 Terry Smith, the executive minister for Canadian Baptist Ministries, writes how he was asked to issue a formal apology on behalf of CBM. As he says before the apology, "As Christians, we are well aware that apologizing (asking and receiving forgiveness for deeds done or not done) to God and each other is at the heart of the journey to reconciliation. It is something we need to do individually and collectively — and often!"

Here are parts of his apology:

"Today, ...as a community of God's people, we admit that too often we have not been or done what we could or should have to live and act justly. To you, our neighbours, our sisters and brothers who have been hurt, directly or indirectly by our actions and inaction, we ask your forgiveness....Our forefathers suffered forms of persecution and exclusion in Europe, yet we acted in a similar manner here. We went from being excluded to being the excluders, from the oppressed to the oppressors. We failed to learn from our past and fully embrace the "other" when we arrived here, despite the hospitality that was extended to us. Although not directly involved in the Residential School system,

we failed our Indigenous brothers and sisters by not speaking out against it, when your language, culture, religion and values were being assaulted and harm was being inflicted on your children. We sinned when we were not the voice of the oppressed...Today we commit ourselves to journeying on a new path. We are a people of the Good News – the Gospel – which promises us new life in Jesus' name. By God's grace, together we will seek to do what God desires from us: to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God."

Notice what is absent from that apology. There is no 'yes, but.' There is no defensiveness. There is no attempt to explain away the past. There is confession. There is humility. There is a recognition that silence can also become participation.

As James states in James 2:8 "You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."" Every individual bears the image of God. Every person has dignity. Every person deserves to be treated with justice, compassion and love. There is no race, social position, ability, background or history that makes one human being more valuable than another.

James calls this the "royal law," *"Love your neighbour as yourself."* (James 2:8)

As we remember the children who attended residential

schools, we must resist the temptation to turn Truth and Reconciliation into merely a historical event that happened to someone else. May we remember that reconciliation is not simply about feeling sorry. It is about learning to see people as God sees them, listening to painful truths, rejecting favoritism and prejudice, and choosing to love our neighbours as ourselves.

The young boy from the story at the beginning, Eugene, carries a photograph of 32 children with him. Only nine are still alive. He says that the others travel with him wherever he goes. That picture reminds us that these were not numbers or statistics. They were children. They had names. They had families. They had languages, dreams, gifts and futures. They were children created and loved by God. He tells his story not because he wants pity, but because he wants understanding and education. That is an important lesson for us.

Truth must come before reconciliation. We cannot truly love our neighbours if we refuse to listen to their stories. We cannot say that everyone is equal before God while ignoring the ways people have been treated as though they were less valuable. James challenges us to examine our own hearts: Who do we value? Who do we overlook? Whose story do we listen to? Whose pain do we dismiss?

Truth-telling matters, but James points us beyond denial and defensiveness toward mercy that leads to action, healing, and changed relationships as we hear in James 2:13 "For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment."

The beginning of James 2 reminds us:

Stop measuring people by human categories.

See the person.

Listen to the story.

Remember the image of God.

Love your neighbour.

Who is your neighbour that you are tempted to overlook? Who is difficult for you to love? Who might feel unseen or excluded?

This week and beyond, don't simply think differently. Practice seeing differently. Train yourself out of favoritism. This week at church or at work, instead of going straight to your usual group, talk to someone you don't normally talk to. Sit with someone you don't normally sit with. Talk to someone you normally pass by. Listen to someone's story before forming an opinion about them. Favoritism isn't defeated merely by having better opinions. It is defeated by practicing a different way of seeing people.

James says, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Reconciliation is not simply something we talk about. It is something we practice.

In Christ, God reconciles us to Himself and calls us to become people of reconciliation. James reminds us that faith without action is dead, and today James says love without equality is hollow. Mercy must shape the way we treat others. So may we be people who tell the truth. People who listen. People who refuse favoritism. People who practice mercy. People who see the image of God in the person standing in front of us. And may we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.