

**Sunday Sermon**  
**September 16, 2018**  
**James 2:1-13**  
**“Standing in the Gap”**

### Introduction

The Neuse River in Kinston, NC, is expected to crest at 30 feet in the coming hours. That is over double flood stage. It is predicted that almost 200 homes and businesses in the city will be destroyed or damaged.

Two years ago following Hurricane Matthew, the river crested at 28.3 feet, breaking the Hurricane Floyd record of 27.7. Three members of First Presbyterian Church, Kinston, died as a result of Hurricane Matthew. Others saw their homes or businesses flooded.

When Presbyterian Disaster Assistance reached out to the church following the flood, members said, “We have suffered great losses. But we have our church and support systems, we even have insurance for our homes and businesses. We want to do something to support those who do not. Those for whom life in the coastal flood plain is an ongoing struggle.”

So remembering their losses, they used donations that came from Presbyterian churches in other places and a grant from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and converted rooms no longer used for a Mothers’ Morning Out program and an After School program. They converted the rooms into a hospitality center for mission teams to be housed while working for people with losses, people who could not afford flood insurance or people who received no or only limited FEMA assistance. This weekend that hospitality center is housing people who had to evacuate their homes for Florence.

That is what Presbyterian Disaster Assistance does. It equips individuals and churches to stand with those who are in the gap, the gap between what is and what should be. Already PDA is assembling response teams to stand with those who need immediate and long-term assistance.

### I

In our passage today, James introduces us to a group of people who seem to be the equivalent of our modern middle class. They were not the rich; the rich were those whose attention they were trying to get. They were not the poor; the poor were those they were ignoring. They were in between, a kind of bell-curve group who represented the broad middle. In other words, they were people like most of us.

And evidently, these in-between people were giving special attention to the wealthy members of the congregation. James does not tell us why they were showing favoritism, but we can make some guesses. Maybe they were hoping to work a business deal. Maybe they were trying to improve their social status, believing that they were known by the company they kept. Or maybe, just maybe, they had a shortfall between their expenses and congregational giving, and they needed some people of means who

could provide the support to get everything done.(1)

Whatever the reason, James writes to these in-between people, “My brothers and sisters, do you really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, the way you are acting with your favoritism?”

And then James gives them a parable: “If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person enters wearing rags, and you say to the man in the suit, ‘Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!’ and then to the street person say, ‘Why don’t you just stand back here in the back so the ushers can keep an eye on you?’ Are you not judging and sorting God’s people? Have you not realized God operates differently? In fact, God chose the world’s down-and-out as the first citizens of the kingdom, with full rights and privileges. The kingdom of God is promised to anyone who loves God.” Quit judging and sorting, James says, for on merciless people there is merciless judgment.

## II

Straight talk from James. James’ listeners had fallen prey to a dynamic that is all too human. When resources are scarce, when the future is uncertain, when the wolf is at the door, we find ourselves trying to hedge our bets, to try to persuade or curry favor from those of means.

I heard about a church who was trying to discern how to increase giving, so they brought in a denominational consultant. “We don’t have encouraging things to tell you,” they said, “There is not a lot of giving potential here. We have some wealthy members, but most of our membership consists of retirees on fixed incomes. The consultant studied and analyzed their giving and came back to give his report. He said, “I have tracked your donors, and I can tell you that what you need is more retirees on fixed incomes. They are the ones carrying your budget, the ones who are committed to what it takes to do ministry and mission.”

But James is not just giving instruction here on how to get the means to do what we need to do. James is giving ethical exhortation. This is not simply a critique of the rich or an exaltation of the poor. This is a call to those in the middle to stand in the gap, in the space between what is and what should be. We are called to take up residence in the gap, because that is where kingdom work is done, that is the place of the cross. (2)

## III

Sandor Teszler was a successful executive in the textile business in Yugoslavia in the 1940s. Teszler was Jewish. As a child he was ostracized, not because he was Jewish but because he was crippled with a clubfoot. He endured many corrective surgeries. And then went on as an adult to become a successful businessman and became known for contributing a great deal to the communities of his businesses.

When the Nazi party rose, he thought his contributions would protect him. He was wrong, almost fatally wrong, for he, his wife and two sons were taken to a death house on the Danube, where victims were not gassed but systematically beaten to death.

One day, midway through beatings, one of his sons pointed to the poison capsule

each of them bore in a locket about their necks. “Is it time to take the pill now, Papa?” he asked. Inexplicably, one of their tormentors leaned down to whisper in Teszler’s ear, “Don’t take the capsule. Help is on the way.” Shortly afterwards, the family was rescued by an official from the Swiss embassy and taken to safety.

Teszler immigrated to the US. Successful again in the textile industry, he set about improving lives around him. In the aftermath of the Brown versus Board of Education desegregation ruling of 1954, Teszler noted escalating rhetoric around him. “I have heard this kind of talk before,” he said, and he decided to do something about it. He inquired where in the South he could set up a mill, and he was led to Kings Mountain, NC.

There he set up textile equipment in an unused high school gym. He hired a group of workers to live on the premises while learning the operation. Half of the trainees were white, and half were black. After an initial tour of this temporary facility, he asked if there were any questions. Following an uneasy silence, one of the white trainees raised his hand and said he was puzzled to find there was only one dormitory and one shower room. “That is correct,” Mr. Teszler answered. “You are being paid considerably more than other textile workers in this region, and this is how we do things. Are there any other questions?” “I guess not,” the worker said.

Weeks later, when the new mill opened, workers of both races were greeted by a group of black and white foremen standing shoulder to shoulder. “Are there any questions?” a black foreman asked. After some shuffling, one of the white workers raised his hand. “Let me get this straight,” he queried. “Is this plant integrated?” One of the white foremen stepped forward, the same man who had asked a similar question weeks earlier. “That is correct,” he said. “You’re being paid a lot more than other textile workers in this region and this is how we do things. Any other questions?” There were none. And because of Sandor Teszler, an entire industry was integrated. (3)

## Conclusion

We have been given considerably more than we have earned or deserve. Now we are called to stand in the gap. You see, in the kingdom of God there is no difference between rich and poor; brown, black and white; young and old; first world and third world; insured and uninsured; free and imprisoned; sick and healthy; naked and clothed; hungry and fed. In God’s economy, we are all equal. If we want to be a part of this kingdom, we need to get that.

Are there any questions? I guess not.

## Notes:

1. From “Standing in the Tragic Gap,” sermon by Trace Haythorn, President of the Fund for Theological Education, Atlanta, GA.
2. Ibid.
3. Patrick Zimmerman, “Sandor Teszler: The Story of a Passionate Life, January 25, 2008, Et Cetera: Publick and Privat Curiosities.

So for today, a contemporary parable:

A wealthy landowner lived in a stately mansion on a high hill that overlooked a green valley. He was richly endowed with worldly goods. He had no religious affiliation. In fact, he professed no faith. His life seemed to be controlled by his quest for wealth. You could say he was possessed by his possessions. And often there seemed to be an emptiness that could not be filled.

At the entrance to the large mansion and surrounding grounds, was a simple dwelling where John, the estate manager lived. John was a man of faith and deep religious commitment. He was a faithful church member, and the Lord's presence was a reality in his home.

One morning, the landowner was looking out over the valley, bright in the rising sun. As he gazed on the beautiful scene, he thought to himself, "It is all mine."

Then he heard the doorbell ring, and he went to find John on the doorstep. The estate manager looked troubled.

"What is the matter John?" the landowner asked, "Are the horses alright?"

"Yes sir, they are fine," John replied, a little hesitant. "Sir, could I have a word with you?" The landowner invited John into the luxurious mansion, a striking contrast to John's dwelling.

"Sir," said John hesitantly, "last night I had a dream, and in it the Lord told me that the richest man in the valley would die tonight at midnight. I felt I should tell you."

"John, that is the most foolish thing I have ever heard," the landowner said. "Do not trouble me with your dreams about the Lord."

"The dream was very vivid, Sir. I was told by the Lord that the richest man in the valley would die at midnight tonight. Sir, I felt that you should know."

The landowner dismissed him, but John's words kept bothering him, so much so that at 11:00 AM, the landowner drove to see his personal physician for a check-up. The doctor examined him, pronounced him fit as a fiddle, and said he would live a long life.

The landowner was relieved. But lingering doubts caused him to invite the doctor for dinner that evening. They enjoyed a sumptuous meal together. Shortly after 11:00 PM, the doctor got up to leave, but the landowner prevailed on the physician to remain for a while longer.

Eventually when midnight passed, the landowner saw the doctor to the door. Then he went upstairs to bed, muttering to himself, "That John has upset my whole day with his silly dream!"

No sooner was he in bed than he heard the doorbell ring. It was 12:30 AM. At the door, he found a grief-stricken girl he recognized as John's daughter.

"Sir," she said through tears, "Mother sent me to tell you that Daddy died at midnight." The landowner was stunned.

He realized who had been the richest man in the valley.

And he realized his own poverty.

(Parable from Kirk H. Neely, Pastor of Morningside Baptist Church, Spartanburg, SC.)

## Conclusion

If we spend all our energies striving to climb the ladder of wealth and success, in the end, after we have climbed to the top of the ladder, we may just find that the ladder was leaning against the wrong wall.

It is a lesson to live by.