



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

23rd Sunday 2021

Human society is organized by rank and class. And you do not have to be born into the strict caste system of India, or belong to the military, to find it. Just try to park at the choice parking spot closest to the door at the office, and there is the sign reserving that privileged spot which reads “CEO,” or “Reserved for Sales Leader of the Quarter.” Or try to board the airplane ahead of that airline’s first class and frequent fliers, and see how far you get before a smiling but firm employee asks you to go back to the end of the line and board “when your group number is called” (translation: “when we board the others in the second class, no-clout, cabin”).

It is a world arranged according to levels of privilege. The most persistent divisions of society occur around distinctions of economics or race; although gender, age, and achievement can subdivide us too. Sometimes the sign reads, “No girls allowed.”



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE
ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

And other times the sign says “Members only.” Sadly, just a few decades ago you could find signs in this country that declared, “Whites Only.”

Wouldn't it be wonderful if there was a place where everyone was treated the same? A true egalitarian society, where everyone was somebody, and where no one received special treatment, there were no social cliques or elite levels to divide us—wouldn't that be someplace special? **Well, there is just such a place. Or at least there is supposed to be such a place. And you are sitting right in the middle of it. It is called the Church.**

I know what you are thinking. The Church, at least as we have experienced it, can still be a place of racial division, or a place where exclusivity and elitism prevail. And that is true. But that



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

is not the way the Church is designed to be, and our lesson from James today is just one of many texts in sacred scripture that prod us back to our intended design. Remember, the Church was created by God to be the visible presence of Christ on earth, carrying out His mission and spreading His message. And an essential part of that message and practice, as shown in the example of Jesus Christ when he walked among us on earth, was

- to create a community of faith shaped by radical acceptance and forgiveness,
- where strangers could shed their strangeness and become family,
- where sinners could find their way home again,
- where all could share equally and joyously in the generous abundance given to us by God through Jesus Christ.

The Church is the place where a millionaire and a beggar can kneel at the same altar, humbly receive the same portion of the Eucharist, and celebrate alike the grace and hope of Christian



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

faith. ***Where else on earth could this little slice of heaven exist? Only the Church.***

But since we fall short of His design so often, God sends us reminders, like this one in the epistle of James, calling us back to the divine blueprints for the Church. Listen again to the counsel of James, and you can tell that the Church of the first century needed the same reminders we need today. James wants his congregation to treat everyone the way God treats everyone—**with gracious acceptance and equal respect.**

So he illustrates this big truth by calling attention to a small detail, the way ushers treat visitors at a worship service. James imagines two visitors showing up at a Christian gathering. The first guest is very wealthy, an important member in society, and thus a great prospect to help the fledgling Church of the first century balance its budget, and gain respectability in Roman society. James describes him in terms of his stylish and expensive clothing and the jewelry on his fingers. He does not just wear a gold ring on his finger, as our translations suggest,



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

James says he literally has “gold fingers.” In that culture, the very rich wore gold jewelry on their fingers so wide that the fingers could barely close; the better to show the jewelry off, but also to advertise that they literally did not have to lift a finger to do menial manual labor. Only the upper crust of Roman society dressed like this, or lived like this.

Just imagine the ushers scrambling to seat this important person in the best pew!

Did they send a note to the pastor alerting him of this special guest?

Did they arrange a luncheon after service with the members of the finance committee who were so eager to elect him their new chairman of the fund drive?

Certainly this special red carpet treatment is the way this wealthy person was treated elsewhere in society. Is there anything wrong with treating him so special in the Church? Well, actually no.



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE
ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

James is *not* suggesting that the rich man should *not* be welcomed lavishly in the Church. There is nothing inherently wrong about having wealth. James certainly would not suggest that the ushers should turn the rich visitor away, or treat him in any way of lavish welcome.

The problem in the Church is ***not*** the way we treat the powerful and wealthy who sit among us, ***it is the different way we treat persons who are far less wealthy, who are powerless in society, who are outcasts from polite social gatherings, who look or smell or dress in such a way that they clearly live on the margins of society.***

James says that these persons should be treated to the red carpet reception just like Mr. Goldfinger. If ***not, the Church is no different than any other gathering of people, and certainly no witness to the world of a Christ who came to establish a community where everybody, absolutely everybody, would be treated like somebody, like the child***



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE
ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

of God they were created to be. How can people believe in such a vision for humanity unless it is lived out, made incarnate, within the Church?

The truth is, we are all more alike than we are different. Our persistent segregating divisions notwithstanding, there is actually very little separation between the finely adorned socialite and the homeless person. It wouldn't take more than 48 hours without a bath, or a good meal, or a good night's rest, and that well-groomed socialite would look and smell homeless too.

And under the surface, where God sees all of us, the similarities are even more pronounced. We all have the same needs, the same hurts, the same hopes. **Under the surface—this is precisely the way God wants the Church to see people.** Not looking on the face, or examining the jewelry, or assessing the fashion. There is enough of that surface judgment going on in



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE

ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

the world, and frankly, aren't we all just a bit bored, tired, and hurt enough by that model of social ranking?

There is another way, another kind of place, a new and refreshing vision for humanity. It is called the Church.

Let's be that kind of place, that kind of people, shall we?