

"Message"  
The United Church of Broomfield  
September 5, 2021

James 2:1-17 (NRSV/CEB)

**1** My fellow believers, do not practice your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an *attitude* of partiality **2** 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, **3** 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," **4** have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

**5** My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Hasn't God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn't God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom she has promised to those who love her? **6** But you dishonor the poor. Isn't it the wealthy who make life difficult for you? Aren't they the ones who drag you into court? **7** Aren't they the ones who insult the good name [of Christ] spoken over you at your baptism?

**8** You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

**9** But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law you are exposed as a lawbreaker. **10** Anyone who tries to keep all of the Law but fails at one point is guilty of failing to keep all of it. **11** The one who said, *Don't commit adultery*, also said, *Don't commit murder*. So if you don't commit adultery but do commit murder, you are a lawbreaker. **12** In every way, then, speak and act as people who will be judged by the law of freedom. **13** There will be no mercy in judgment for anyone who hasn't shown mercy. Mercy overrules judgment.

**14** My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? **15** Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. **16** What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? **17** The same is true with faith. Without actions, *faith is useless. By itself, it's as good as dead.*

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In a well-educated, affluent, progressive congregation, this text is typically heard as a call to impartiality, to even-handedness. "What James is telling us," people will say to themselves, "is that we should treat people fairly and equally—whether they are rich or poor, it should not make a difference. All people are equal in the sight of God."

[There's] Nothing wrong with that, I suppose—even-handedness is a virtue. But James is talking about something more daring. Yes, he condemns partiality, but he is not really advocating for neutral impartiality; in fact, he is trying his best to get the church to display partiality, but of a different kind—the kind of partiality that God expresses. While the American image of justice is a blindfolded woman holding balance scales, the biblical image is instead a God who sees everything and sets things right. God is not impartial; God chooses the weak and establishes justice.

The church's problem, as James describes it, is that the way it seats people for worship expresses the world's form of partiality instead of God's: where God has chosen the poor and dishonored the rich, the church has done the opposite. James indicates that fawning over the rich in worship is not only stupid but also a denial of the true wealth of baptism, in which the poor, the weak and the lowly are transformed into the royal children of God.

The church is called not to even-handedness but instead to let the light of Christ disclose genuine worth. James's point is not to encourage the ushers to smile with equal warmth toward all who come to worship but instead to remind the church that in the economy of God's grace, the very ones for whom the world has little regard have become the guests of honor in the household of God.<sup>1</sup>

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### The Hungry Goat by Demi

For all who wear heaven in their hearts

Once Upon a time in Turkey there lived a funny, little wise man named Nasrettin Hoca. He wore a huge, white turban and a worn-out coat made of patches upon patches. Riding about on his little gray donkey, he liked to help whomever he could.

One day Nasrettin Hoca heard a great commotion inside a caravansary, a hostel for travelers. A frisky goat had gotten loose inside the kitchen. Kicking and prancing, she was breaking all the dishes, knocking over pots and pans and spilling all the cooking oil. The cook was screaming, and a few travelers were slipping in the oil as they tried to catch the goat.

Because he loved goats so much, Nasrettin always carried a sweet apple in his pocket for them. He quickly took out the apple and cut it into little pieces. He lined up the pieces, so as the little goat nibbled to the last piece, Nasrettin was able to catch her.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2009-08/god-partial>

Gently Nasrettin put the little goat back into her pen, and everyone cheered. The caravansary owner invited Nasrettin to eat with the other travelers, but Nasrettin declined, as he was on his way to a banquet at the home of a rich friend

Nasrettin trotted off, waving to all and happy to have helped. He was so late now that he realized he would not have time to change his coat, which was not only worn out with patches upon patches but also oily, dirty, and smelling of goat.

When Nasrettin's friend opened the door to Nasrettin, he was shocked. He was afraid his other guests would laugh at him for being friends with such a shabby, smelly man. Nasrettin simply jumped off his donkey, hugged his friend, and joined the banquet. He was so happy to be among friends that for a while he didn't notice something very strange; no one was facing him.

All the guests had turned their backs toward Nasrettin and when the servants brought dinner into the room, the food was served to everyone but him. Before long Nasrettin was left sitting alone with nothing at all to eat. Several times he tried to start a conversation by yelling to a guest at the opposite side of the room, but no one listened, and no one responded.

Nasrettin looked thoughtfully at his friends. Each man was scrubbed until he glistened. Each one was wearing his best coat. Then Nasrettin looked down at his own coat -- worn out with patches upon patches, oily, dirty, and smelling of goat.

Very quietly Nasrettin slipped out the door. He mounted his little donkey and began trotting home when he had an idea. At home, Nasrettin jumped into a tub of hot water, poured in a whole jar of perfumed soap crystals, and scrubbed himself until he glistened and the whole room was filled with bubbles. Nasrettin dried and powdered himself. Then he put on new shoes with tassel toes, a magnificent new turban with sparkling jewels, and a fine new coat of shining silk with golden threads.

Nasrettin preened himself before a mirror. never had he been so completely well-dressed. Never had anyone worn a coat like this one. How fine he looked. He strutted out of his house. Everyone nodded respectfully as he swaggered along the street, heading back to his rich friend's home.

A servant ushered Nasrettin into the banquet hall and his smiling host immediately served him food and drink. Everyone smiled and nodded at Nasrettin. What a fine figure he made. What a fine coat? Nasrettin was the most popular man at the banquet.

He picked up the choicest grilled lamb chop. But instead of putting it in his mouth, he put it inside his coat! "Eat coat, Eat!" said Nasrettin.

Nasrettin picked up fish fried in vine leaves and roasted eggplant. Opening his coat, he said, "Eat coast, Eat!"

Nasrettin scooped up pilaf, raisins, and pistachio nuts. Opening his coat, he said, "Eat, coat! Eat!" Boiled squash stuffed with hash and olives went into the coat. "Eat, coat! Eat!" Slices of chicken breast stewed in rosewater, sugar cakes, flavored jellies, sherbet, sticky baklava, pomegranates, persimmons, oranges, apples, figs, and dates. All of this food Nasrettin stuffed into his bulging coat shouting, "Eat, coat! Eat!

Finally, Nasrettin opened his coat once more and poured a whole bottle of wine inside. Then, closing his coat as best as he could, Nasrettin patted his belly and smiled at his host.

All the guests were amazed! What was he doing? At last the alarmed host said, "Tell me my old friend, why are you feeding your coat?"

"Surely, you wanted my coat to eat," he replied. When I first arrived in my old coat made of patches upon patches, there was no food for me. Yet when I came back in this new coat there was every kind of food for me. This shows it was the coat -- and not me -- that you invited to your banquet!"

"Remember this my friends," said Nasrettin Hoca. "If you want to look deeply, look at the man and not at his coat. You can change the coat, but you cannot change the man. A coat may be fine, but a coat does not make a man. Outside a man may wear a sheepskin, but inside he may wear the heart of a wolf! Many a good man may be found under a shabby coat. With coats, new [ones] are the best, but with friends, old [ones] are the best!"

Everyone cheered. "The wisdom of Nasrettin Hoca calls for celebration," exclaimed the host. Music and fireworks resounded, and everyone danced under the stars of heaven.

[The one] who wears heaven in [their] heart is always well dressed.^

AMEN

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*^ Nasrettin Hoca (1208-1284) was a leading folk philosopher and humorist born in the rural Turkish village of Hortu. His father was the imam of the village and Nasrettin himself served as imam of the village before moving to the town of Alchir to study as a dervish with two famous Islamic Mystics. Nasrettin became known for his common sense and droll sense of humor. He was called Hoca or Hodja which means "teacher" in Turkish, and stories about his adventures and wisdom became true folk tales told and embellished by adults and children alike for over 700 years. Today his stories are translated into many languages and are told from eastern Turkmenistan to Hungary and from southern Siberia to northern Africa and now in America. With their universal themes of societal roles, survival, the joys and sorrows of daily life, and the relationships between people, people and objects, and people and animals, the stories all center around, not through, Nasrettin himself as a symbol of common sense, clear wisdom and good natured humor. As does **The Hungry Coat**, many of Nasrettin's stories end with a moral or clever epigram meant to teach the listener or reader a valuable life lesson. The Nasrettin stories are immortal as is true of all great folk art. Every year between July 5th and July 10<sup>th</sup>, the international Nasrettin Hoca Festival is held in Alchir, where Nasrettin died and his tomb now stands. Keeping the character of Nasrettin Hoca alive through stories such as **The Hungry Coat**, writers, artists, and musicians attend the festival to create new plays, music, movies, cartoons, comic strips, and paintings about this beloved folk figure. Maybe you can think up a Nasrettin Hoca story too.*