

Rich and Poor Alike

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Well today we are kicking off a new theme for the year at Artisan. And you know how our years run from summer to summer, but you know how the world goes and things don't really get started until the school year begins and so we're just kind of getting rolling with this new idea starting this week and the theme is beloved community. This is a phrase that was popularized by Dr Martin Luther King to describe a world that conforms to God's vision for creation. Where racism and violence and poverty are no longer dominant. Where we are all connected by our mutual love and care. And where the boundaries and divisions that separate us have been eradicated. That was Dr King's way of describing the vision. We're going to use the simple shorthand phrase, "loving our neighbors as ourselves".

Now you know I'm not usually the one that asks you to say something with me, but would you say that with me? "loving our neighbors as ourselves". That's going to be the watchword for us for this coming year. And it's something that I will preach on. We have a whole series here starting today called Beloved Community. I'll be preaching on it for a month or so. But unlike in the past with our other themes, and if you've been an Artisan and for all you've known you know that we've had these themes many times over last several years, unlike in the past where it's going to be lots of sermon series peppered throughout the year where I'm teaching on the theme, this year we're going to keep preaching on the lectionary -that schedule of Scripture texts -because I like working that way. It's nice to know what's coming up. It's nice for you to know what's coming up. And here's the good news, I can still preach on beloved community by using the lectionary texts because -spoiler alert- beloved community is a biblically informed concept. And as a matter of fact, this whole ostensibly topical series, beloved community, is based on the lectionary text for the next four or five weeks.

So instead of me preaching on little subtopics throughout the year we're going to live out Beloved Community in our life as a church. It's going to permeate everything that we do. Hopefully it will inform the types of activities that we do, the types of service projects that we

engage in. Hopefully will be present with us while we're doing social connection events and getting out into the neighborhood to do various outreaches and things like that. Beloved Community is going to be the thing that kind of echoes across all that we do that we hope this year.

Now something else that's special, at least for this series, is that we have a really great little project that you can do during the sermon, OK. And so I'm going to ask my helpers back there, who also happen to be my family, to set this out. You may have seen during our children's moments, and the children's bulletins and things in the coloring pages, that we have these great resources that we get from a company called Illustrated Children's Ministry and the kids love coloring these in. But why should kids be the ones who get the color? So we bought some of their poster coloring pages that are, you know, they hit the themes of beloved community. So, I want everybody, everybody in the room -adults included- to take at least a minute or two back there at the table. And you can see a picture of what these look like. There is the uncovered one I don't want to set the bar too high but they sent us one that's been colored in as well that's really great we might not reach that in where Artisan church will do our best. So you can go back to, if you just need something to occupy your mind so that you don't have to listen to another middle aged white guy talk for twenty five minutes you can be back there the whole time that's fine. But if you just want to go back and do, like, a couple of pieces you can do that as well. And this is for everybody. Now kids, if you're here with us, and some of the younger kids- younger than usual kids- are with us as Jessie said for one more week now, they have their busy bags but that doesn't mean they can't color. But, it does mean that you know there should be room for you to color even if you're a grown up so starting now. Starting now- I mean somebody should get up and go color their coloring pages and ...thank you! Thank you, that's good. And at any time in the sermon if you get up, I'll assume that you're just painting in the artist's unsanctioned activity whether you're getting coffee or not.

All right so we're going to turn our attention today to the New Testament epistle reading from the lectionary. This is from the Book of James. Now I'm going to give you a little bit of the Bible life back for the book of James and how to find it. I mean you could use the page number that I put on the screen, but what fun would that be? This is going to be a little Bible life hack. Kind of like the scriptural equivalent of knowing that you can push the tabs in on the side of the aluminum foil box and it will hold the tube in there. How many of you didn't know that? How many of you did I just gave you a real life hack? All right, all right- it works with the plastic wrap as well. So if you learn nothing else today you at least have a tidier kitchen or something, I don't know.

So many of you know the Bible is divided into two parts. If you already know all this, just come with me it will be very fast. Old Testament and New Testament, the Old Testament is that the term that Christians give to the Jewish scriptures and the New Testament is the term that we give to our own scriptures which kind of informed the Christian church in the early days and has continued to inform the Christian church throughout our entire history as a religion. So in the New Testament we start off with the Gospels for books: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These are the books that tell the story of the life and ministry, and teaching and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus. After the four gospels we have one book called Acts, or the act of the Apostles. This is the book that tells the story of the formation of the early church. Lots of wonderful stories in there as they figured out what it meant to be still Jewish but also Christian. And that has reverberations for us today. And then we get into almost the rest of the whole Bible is letters we call them epistles. They're letters written by the Apostles the church to the Christian churches, or in some cases to individuals in the Christian church, to help them understand how they should live their their Christian life.

Now here's the life hack, it's a bible hack really, when you get into the epistles, the letters, they are organized first by author, and then within an author, they're organized by length! Did you know that? So right after the book of Acts, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we actually have the book of Romans which is the first of the Pauline epistles, the letters written by the Apostle Paul. Except it's not the first one that he wrote, it's the longest one that he wrote. And then the next one is first Corinthians and we put the second Corinthians in there because they're together and that goes on like that from longest to shortest until we get to Hebrews which is written by somebody else. We don't know who wrote Hebrews, that stands by itself. And right after Hebrews is the Book of James. That's what we're looking at today. So there's a life hack for you today. If you want to know which of which epistle comes next, just- you know- search your memory back and recall which one was the longest to the shortest and put them in order, then you'll be fine. I think I might have made it harder not easier, but anyway.

So this is the this is the letter of James. Now there are several people in the New Testament named James. This one we believe is the brother of Jesus. Can you imagine being the brother of Jesus? Like, so, if you had a brother who was really good at basketball and you're always in his shadow.. you got nothing on James. James was the leader of the church in Jerusalem so when you see these disputes in the book of Acts, there was one dispute that's described in Acts fifteen, and James is overseeing the resolution of that dispute -he was a very important figure in the church and he cared a lot about how Christians live their lives and it shows in this epistle, this letter as we'll see. By the way, Martin Luther, the great reformer the great Protestant reformer, hated the book of James. He thought it should be removed from the Bible. He went so far as to say "it's so bad it couldn't have been written by Jesus' brother, it's just somebody

else using that name. It's an epistle full of straw." He actually said this about the book of James. Why? Well because it conflicted somewhat with his pet theology. He was very very concerned I think, with good reason, with the idea of justification by faith but he didn't want anything to do with something that was works because it was too Catholic. And so he wanted to kick this book right out of the Bible. So if you think the whole thing about like, well you're just changing with the winds of culture, or, you're not obeying the Bible because you don't like what it says- if you think that's a uniquely modern/postmodern thing. No, one of the great figures of the church had the same problem. And especially if a Lutheran ever comes up to you and says that you can say like, "No ,sorry you don't even know what you're talking about".

All right anyway. With that rather lengthy background out of the way let's let's see, let's see if we can figure out what James has to say about beloved community. About loving our neighbors, when I do this in my hands you're supposed to say it with me, about loving our neighbors as ourselves- thank you. All right. And lest I can be accused of burying the lead even further, I want to jump right to verse eight of chapter two because it turns out that when you get to verse eight James is right on target with this idea. Here's what it says in verse eight, " You do well if you really fulfill the royal law. According to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. " Now. Where do you think James got this idea. His brother thank you Penny. His brother said this! Jesus said this! You remember the story, somebody came up to Jews and said Teacher What is the greatest law? What is the greatest command in all the law? And he said, the first commandment is you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength, all heart, soul, mind, and strength. And the second one is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. This is what Jesus did. He took the entire law and distilled it down into two. Very simple. We like that about Jesus right? But guess what, Jesus didn't make that up. Where did Jesus get that from? Jesus got it from that warm fuzzy book of the Bible that we all love to quote so much which shows up on the Bible verse a day calendars, the book of Leviticus. Wow! How many of you ever had, I mean we've all had the book of Leviticus quoted at us let's be honest, but how many of you had a positive experience of having the book of Leviticus quoted at you? Well here you go! Jesus did it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. And his brother James picks up the mantle right here.

I think we all have a picture of what it means to love our neighbors. And the pictures based on who are neighbors are. So if I was to ask you to stop for a second picture your neighbors, your actual neighbors- who are the people who live next to you? And what do they look like? I bet that they look a lot like you. So it's usually somewhat easy to imagine loving your neighbor as yourself. You might have a particular neighbor that you don't like very much but you can love your neighbor as yourself. It's easy because chances are your neighbor looks just like you. Chances are your neighbor talks just like you. Your neighbor probably shops just like you. And

drives just like you your neighbor is probably you. With a different name. And a different street address. And that is probably due to the fact that in in our community especially, but all across America, we are, we continue to be racially segregated. The reverberations and echoes of Jim Crow continue. Long after it ceased to be law of the land, we still are segregated by race and were segregated in our communities if not racially, then certainly economically and culturally. And so it's not usually too difficult to imagine loving our neighbors or self because our neighbors are so much like us. And that's why I think when Jesus gave this law about loving your neighbor as yourself and he was asked the question the follow up question, well who is my neighbor? How did he answer that question? He told a story. This is Jesus way, it's rather infuriating. Someone asked a straight question he said, "Well, imagine there was a man..." It's like, oh...here he goes again! Jesus tells what story in answer to that question who is my neighbor? The Good Samaritan, the parable of the Good Samaritan, right?

This is the story of about how all of his listeners expectations were wrong. About who was good and who was godly and who was deserving of love. So we might have a picture of neighbors. Who are similar or are who are the same as us. But I don't think James is talking about a neighbor love that assumes that kind of sameness. It certainly is not likely that he was if he's teaching in the Jesus tradition, which you know Jesus was his brother after all. You do really well, James says, if you fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, you still love your neighbor as yourself and then he said that word, But. I don't want to be overly irreverent, but you should look out for the buts in the Bible. That's one of the rules. It's kind of like what's the therefor there for. Watch out for the buts. But, if you show partiality you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. Convicted by the law. The what law? The royal law. The one he was just talking about. The law that we love so much because it takes all this complexity that seems so impossible, and maybe even unnecessary, and at the stills it down into two commandments love God and love your neighbor. Guess what?! It's simple, it's beautiful, but it's not easy. And it convicts us as sinners when we, at least in the one example, show partiality. In other words, if you want to obey that law but you show favoritism to one group over another, that law will stop being a grace and beauty to you and it will begin to convict you. It's beginning to convict me and it's going to convict all of you in just about five minutes.

So we can go back now to the beginning of this passage and pick up the context. We will see where James was coming from when he said this. When he quotes that pretty law of Jesus he had just said all of the following -My brothers and sisters do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? He went for it on the first verse! He said you don't even believe in Jesus when you act that way. 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

other who is poor you say, stand there or sit at my feet, have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen my beloved brothers and sisters, has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheming the excellent name that was invoked over you? And now this is going to sound familiar, you do really well if you fulfill the royal law according to the scripture you shall love your neighbor as yourself. But, if you show partiality you commit sin and are convicted by that law as transgressors. Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all. And then the lectionary jumps ahead. Verse fourteen, what good is it my brothers and sisters if you say you have faith but do not have works, can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, Go in peace keep warm and eat your fill, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. And that's why Martin Luther did want to put in the Bible.

So James is specifically talking here about religious assemblies that show favoritism to wealthy parishioners and wealthy visitors. Which we would never do, right? I mean, the other churches might do that, but we at Artisan would never do that, would we? I mean if we stop and think about how each one of us actually does respond to different types of people when they walk in the door, I think we have to admit that we do show some kinds of partiality. It's not a question of whether or not we do because we do. I'm interested in why we might do it. Because if you understand why you do something wrong and sinful, it can be helpful in correcting that behavior that attitude. So here's the problem as I see it. I don't think you're going to like what I'm about to say. I'm not sure I like it but I think it's true. I think ultimately we do most of us believe that rich people are better than poor people. I think even those of us who are woke social justice warriors and want to eradicate poverty, we usually think that rich people are still better than poor people. That's half the reason why we are in this twisted kind of way motivated to bring them out of poverty because we think their life is not as valuable in its current state. And if they could just be more middle class, more like us, that their life would be more valuable. And so for their sake we should lift them out of that. We think additionally that our able bodied lives matter more than the lives of people with disabilities. And that's why rather than going to the effort and expense of improving their access to our spaces in their present state, we drag them up to the front of our churches and pray for their healing never even remembering to ask them whether they want to be healed in the first place. We think that our culture is inherently better than other ones around the world so we run missions programs that don't seem to make a very clear distinction between spreading the gospel of Christ and spreading the gospel of Western culture. And I could go on but here's the point. True justice

true righteousness, and don't make a distinction between those two things, it does not come when a privileged person decides to stoop down and help an underprivileged person.

True justice comes when we remove the language of stooping down altogether. True justice comes when we realize that we are all connected. That we are all one and that there is no one who is better than anyone else. That when one person hurts we all hurt. That when one person rejoices we all rejoice. That when one person is enslaved in bondage, we are all enslaved and in bondage. And when one person is liberated, we are all liberated. This is the vision of beloved community. And I hope and pray it will shape our lives in church over the coming year. And it starts with recognizing an important theological truth. One of the great questions from the stump the pastor week last week, and there were some great questions. Most of the questions were way better than any of my answers. But one of the questions was referring to things like the Book of Proverbs which I have taught in the past; we need to remember they are proverbs and principles rather than promises. And there's a distinction between those two things -and that doesn't mean it's less valuable to us as scripture -but it does change how we apply it in interpret it. And the question was about well how do you know which is a principle in scripture and which is just a little specific detail for one time. And that's a hard thing to figure out. It's one of the hard work, hard jobs that we have when we decide to study scripture seriously. But I'm going to give you a straight up big fat principle from the Book of Proverbs. This is one of the other lectionary text from today we read it at the confession. I don't know if you remember it- Proverbs twenty two Verse two, the rich and the poor all have this in common the Lord is the maker of them all. See creation is the great leveling of the playing field right from the very beginning. Every single person is and they made in God's image. Doesn't matter who you are, doesn't matter what color you are, doesn't matter who you love, doesn't matter. None of that changes anything about you bearing what the Latin church calls the Imago Dei. It's important they give it a Latin name. The Imago Dei, the image of God. Every single one of you in this room bears that image equally. It's inherent to you being made by the same God. And that's one of those principles we have to get into our heads if we're going to actually live into and implement and make it a reality the idea of a beloved community where divisions of been broken down where poverty and racism and violence are not the solutions are not the status quo. We have to understand that every person is made by the same God in that God's image. The rich and the poor all have this in common, the Lord is the maker of them all. The rich and the poor, and the black and the white and the brown person, and the man and the woman, and the non-binary person, and the straight, and the gay, and the bi- person, and the disabled and the non-disabled person, and the Republicans and the Democrats, and the Independents, and the city dwellers, and the suburbanites, and the small town farm people. All of them made in the image of the same God. They all, we all, have this in common -the Lord is the maker of us all.

So let's remember that this year, whatever we may do, whatever small groups we may be part of, whatever ministry teams we may join, whatever songs we sing, whatever scriptures we read, whatever evangelism we do, whatever justice initiatives we undertake, whatever neighborhood outreach we try to do, every person we come in contact, with every person we work alongside and serve, every person who serves us, all of us made by the same God. Creation. The great leveling of the playing field from day one. May that inform us inspire us and convict us this year. Amen.

I invite you now to come and receive Holy Communion and that man, what a perfect time to remember that the sacrament of communion is also a great leveling of the playing field. Jesus invites us all to his supper to his table to receive his body broken and his blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. This is the table not of the church, but of the Lord. It is to be made ready for those who wish to find him here in his will. That those who seek Him would find him here. And so all are invited to come and receive communion take a piece of the bread to put in one of the cups. We have a gluten free bread in the middle. We have both wine and juice. Choose the combination that's best for your health and your family's life together. Receive that right at the table. Remember Christ sacrificed for you and for all. May it be food for your spiritual soul. Your hungry souls. May it be an act of unity with each other, with Christians around the world. I'm going to invite you to come up through the two middle aisles here. We have a different seating arrangement this week so take communion at the table and then go out to the outside aisles to go down back to your seats. And there's a member of the prayer team to be happy to pray with you if you like during this time as well. A table is open come and receive His Grace.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com