

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost: James 2:1-17

Written by The Rev. Steve White

with minimal changes by The Rev. Brooks Cato

Many of you have had the pleasure of meeting Fr. Steve. We met in seminary and have been best friends pretty much since Day 1. Before moving up here to his churches just south of us, Steve worked in a couple of places in Tennessee. He wrote a sermon about his time there several years back, and his people up here loved it so much they asked him to preach it the next time those same readings came around again. Y'all, that just doesn't happen. This sermon, well, I figure if it's good enough for his people to hear twice, then it's probably good enough for y'all to hear, too. Now, normally I don't openly steal sermons from Fr. Steve, but given what's been going on in the church lately with clergy scandals and declining numbers and changing life patterns – and given what's going on in our civic life, with such intolerance, injustice, and wickedness, I wanted to take this opportunity to say to you here and now why I think we are so desperately needed. . . now more than ever. Some of you may have heard Steve tell this story before, but I think it stands up to time. I've made a couple of changes, mostly just switching up pronouns here and there to make it easier to follow second-hand. But otherwise, this is a Fr. Steve original called "The Ballad of Little Jimmy." And it goes like this:

One hot summer day in Little Rock, I found myself sitting on the patio with Fr. Steve, in front of a smoker, awaiting brisket and sausage and other awesome food, petting the dogs, and doing as little as possible. As we sat there we started talking about the future of the church. Specifically, we talked about and imagined what the church would look like in a few decades. There are some "experts" that think that the era of the church as a stained-glassed, stand-alone building will soon be a thing of the past. They say that people don't want them anymore, that these places don't mean as much as they did, and that asking for parishioners to give of their treasure to keep them going was not going to work. Steve just sat there, petting Cotton the Dog, and said, "Well that's a crock." And he thought back on his memories of Little Jimmy.

*Our reading from James exhorts us: If a rich person in fine clothes comes in, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you notice the rich one and not the poor one, is this not against the teaching of Christ?*

Steve first met Little Jimmy in downtown Knoxville while he was doing the healing service at church. He had noticed him before during that service. It was hard not to notice Little Jimmy. He would come in late, sit in the back pew and mutter to himself. Sometime during the service, he would close his eyes and slowly, slowly slide sideways in the pew until he was stretched out there. When the service was over, he would leave, headed back down the street. But one day, Fr. Steve stopped him and struck up a conversation. He found out that Little Jimmy was homeless (of course), and could smell that he was boozed up. But they talked for a long time. Steve found out that he liked to come to church because it was the only place he could fall asleep without having to worry about being robbed for what little cash he had scrounged up. Steve invited him to come early, while they were setting up, so he could get a good solid hour of rest. He smiled, and he took him up on the offer.

Little Jimmy had some college, but he let the drugs get ahold of him. And his family kicked him out, and he had nowhere to turn. So he started with prostitution, but after a while, the drugs and the alcohol took their toll, and he couldn't even earn a living doing that, so he turned to stealing. But even stealing required some sobriety, and now he was just a panhandler. That was the Little Jimmy who slept in the pews because church was safe. Little Jimmy became a fixture at the Wednesday night community dinners, too. He tried eating at the nearby homeless shelter, but that was hard on him. There was a sort of hierarchy among the homeless, and Little

Jimmy was on the bottom rung. More likely than not other guys would take his food because he was too messed up to defend himself. So when he found out that Steve's church had Wednesday dinners, he started showing up.

Watching Little Jimmy around food was an amazingly sad sight to behold. He would always go first and pile up his plate and sit by himself and eat. He didn't want to sit with other people, he just wanted a place to be left alone. He would eat plate after plate. Then sometimes Little Jimmy would go into the bathroom. . . and throw it all up. Steve asked him, one night, why he did that. And he said, "Man, the food is so good, and I can have all I want. I'm sorry about the bathroom. I'll go away, if you want me to." As a reaction, the men of the church formed a Little Jimmy watch, called "Team Jimmy." They didn't want him to have to leave. So, every Wednesday, one of the guys was always in charge of watching Little Jimmy get up and go into the bathroom. When he left, that parishioner would, silently, with no complaint, go in behind him and clean up if it was necessary. Little Jimmy never knew that.

*James goes on to ask: Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?*

Once, Little Jimmy showed up during the day to see Fr. Steve. He needed money. He was going to the bus station, he said, to go home down in Georgia. He just needed eleven more dollars and he could get the ticket. Steve told him that he could drive him to the station and buy his ticket, but his church didn't give out cash. He got agitated. Steve told him he didn't understand...after all, he was still getting a ticket. He started yelling, and then he stopped and whispered, "Man, you know I'm lying, don't you?" Steve said, "Yeah, Jimmy, I do." And he said, "Dude, I just need something to make it all go away." Steve gave Little Jimmy the eleven dollars. He walked off, then he came back and shook his hand. He said, "I love this place. God keeps us safe here." Steve told that story to a women's Bible study group. After that, they made a Little Jimmy change bucket. So, if he ever needed cash, he didn't have to justify himself – he could just get what was in the bucket, no questions asked.

*Finally James lays it on the line: If a brother needs clothing or food, and you don't step in, what is the good of faith?*

The last time Fr. Steve saw Little Jimmy was in an ambulance on the way to St. Mary's hospital. It was a dark January morning. No surprise, Steve was the first one into work, and it was dark and even in Tennessee, it'd been snowing a little, so when he got up to the church, he noticed footprints leading over to the church building. Steve went over there, and Little Jimmy was huddled up against the door with no jacket. He was covered in blood and had been beaten up. He had somehow managed to make it to the church before he collapsed. Steve called 9-1-1 and covered him in his coat and sat there, holding him, waiting for the ambulance. Little Jimmy was shivering and chattering, whispering, "Oh, God. Oh, God" over and over. The medics finally showed up and got him in the ambulance. Steve asked if he could go, so they made room. On the ride to the hospital, Little Jimmy looked around and recognized Steve. He rasped out, "Can I come back?" "Yeah, Jimmy, of course," Steve said, and he meant it. His church was there for Little Jimmy. But Little Jimmy was also there for them. Because, you see, to love, there has to be someone to receive love. To reach out, there has to be someone to touch. And that's what church is about. And that's why we need these places. That's why we need this place. In this darkening world, we are a refuge. We provide sacred beauty to people out in an ugly profane world. We provide a loving touch for people who flinch from the fists of others. We are a light in that darkness, refusing to give up on the idea that the Kingdom of God is a doable thing, here and now. We are sanctuary.

Church is sanctuary. We can't give that up. We can't abandon that responsibility.

Little Jimmy died on that trip to the hospital. The medics just couldn't revive him this time. Before he died, he looked at Steve in that ambulance and said, "I'm sorry for being so much trouble." Steve walked the three miles back to the church that day as the flurries danced around reminding him of manna, of God's presence on that cold street.

When he finally got back to the church, waiting on him was a woman who needed money to get her car fixed. She said she had most of it, but only needed twenty more dollars. She was lying, of course. Steve knew it, and she knew he knew it. But, Steve invited her into the church to get warm and talk, and he listened to her story. Because church is a refuge. This place is a light. This place is sanctuary.