



## Mary McLeod Bethune: The Way of Authority

James 2:1-9

Rev. Thomas G. James

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Over the past few weeks, we have been studying about the ways we as disciples are called to be stewards of the time, talent, and treasure God has gifted us. We are learning different forms of stewardship from the saints who have come before us – from St. Luke, Sarah Crosby, and St. Francis of Assisi. Fitting that we end our journey today on All Saints' Sunday – a day on which we remember and celebrate all who have come before us and taught us faithful discipleship.

While stewardship is often limited in conversation within the life of the church to financial giving, the reality is, all that we have is a gift of God – the earth and creation that surround us, the friends and family who support us, the time we have to work, play, and share in community, wealth and material belongings, and knowledge, experience, and expertise. All that we have at our disposal is of God, and is gifted to us for our participation in God's creation.

Over the past few weeks we've learned that as stewards, we are called to share in the *way of necessity* – there are times when an immediate need arises around us, and we are called to respond with haste to ensure the other is cared for. Stewardship is about *the way of generosity* – refusing to hoard what one has, but sharing freely and lovingly to help those in the community who do not have enough. Last week we learned about stewardship as *the way of poverty* – about giving up all that has a demand for allegiance to anything other than God. We are called to give as there is need, aligning the use of our resources with the will of God, with a grateful heart for the opportunity to share in God's work in the world.

Today, we close out our focus on *Stewardship with the Saints* as we consider stewardship as *The Way of Authority* from Mary McLeod Bethune.

To understand the significance and saintly guidance from Mary McLeod Bethune, you have to understand the Biblical text from James 2:1-9.

James, the author of this letter, writes to the scattered Jewish Christian population about 20-30 years after Jesus' death. In our text in chapter 2, he offers up a hypothetical situation to faithful Christians throughout the Mediterranean region. Unlike Paul, who wrote to specific faith communities about specific issues, James is writing more broadly about concerns for the church universal. He poses this scenario, "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 one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thought?"

Already, the hearer is invited to consider their own personal actions. Even without his explanation, James is drawing our attention to this scenario where-in a person who looks wealthy is treated with

respect, while someone who looks poor is treated with contempt. But to ensure we don't miss his point, James explains his teaching.

“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?” He goes on, “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.”

I will not go through the full list of Scriptural texts which affirm James' claim, we'd be here until nightfall – but it is repeated time and time again, God has shown favor among the poor in the world. God is impartial and just, and as such, is compassionate and zealous for the poor and oppressed.<sup>i</sup> Showing favoritism, as is portrayed in James' hypothetical scenario, does not align with God's will, as is exemplified by Christ. It doesn't matter if it's in regard to wealth, race, gender, religion, sexual preference, country of residence, or cultural identity – favoritism is named as being antithetical to the Biblical teaching. In Mark's Gospel, the Pharisees address Jesus and say, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to *none*.” ... Not only does Jesus teach about loving all, he also visibly exemplifies it with his life.

James' teaching, rebuking favoritism, claims that “New people, whatever their social rank, need to be stitched into the social fabric of the church, not merely formally received as new members.”<sup>ii</sup> Such a teaching is echoed in Paul's articulation in 1 Corinthians 12 of the church in which all members are necessary for the church to function as the body of Christ it has been created to be.

This vision of humanity as equal – this vision of there being a place for everyone – this vision of each person participating and sharing in God's creation is what drove Mary McLeod Bethune throughout her life.

Bethune was born the 15<sup>th</sup> of 17 children. Her parents, and many of her older brothers and sisters, were born slaves. By the time she was born, her family had been freed from slavery, but still worked the plantation in an attempt to make enough money to buy their own farm. At the house of her mother's former master, Bethune had an unforgettable interaction with a young white girl. She was in the girl's playroom looking at the books and school supplies that lay around the room. As she started to pick up a book, the young girl made it clear that Bethune could not read, and led her over to the picture books. Bethune says she realized that the only difference between her and the white girl was their ability to read and write. The rest of her life was dedicated to removing the distinctions people use to divide one from another.

She was afforded a college education at Scotia Seminary in North Carolina, and went on to attend the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Her desire was to serve as a missionary in Africa, but she was denied the opportunity by the Presbyterian Mission Board, who told her there were no spots for African Americans to serve in Africa. She moved back home to South Carolina, and began a teaching career, both in South Carolina and Georgia. She focused on teaching young black children – pursuing her goal of removing the distinctions people use to divide one from another.

After marrying and giving birth to a son, her family relocated to Palatka, Florida, where she opened a missionary school for young black children. Her husband left her with her son in Florida, after which she moved to Daytona.

Arriving in Daytona, she had a vision to start another missionary school for black children. She made her first down-payment of \$1.50 to secure an old dilapidated building and in 1904, she opened the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls.<sup>iii</sup> The first year, she had 5 students. Within a few years, the school had grown to 250 students. She began to realize a need for a bigger and improved facilities.

As she worked to build the school, she invited James Gamble, of Proctor and Gamble, to consider an investment in the school. She said to him, "I am not coming to you for money, Mr. Gamble, but for your personal interest in the work that I have to do."<sup>iv</sup> Gamble gathered, along with some 20 other potential donors, and she shared with them her vision for the school. She invited them to be trustees of her dream. Gamble was the first to stand and accept the invitation and he became the head of the Board of Trustees.

17 years later Bethune was approached by the Cookman Institute, a school for boys within the Methodist Episcopal Church South, about merging their two schools. The two merged and formed the Daytona-Cookman Collegiate Institute – today, it's known as Bethune-Cookman University – which maintains its connection with the United Methodist Church and is still supported by the Higher Education and Black College Funds of the United Methodist Church.

Bethune went on to serve with three presidential administrations, most notably under FDR, she served as the Director for Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration. After leaving the government, she became the vice-president for the NAACP.

In her work with the schools she created, and in her positions in the government and the NAACP, Bethune was not one to offer seats of honor to wealthy investors. Instead of giving them a place of privilege, she invited them to the table with everyone else. She offered them the same invitation she offered to the young black girls who were the focus of her educational work. To every person at the table, she extended an invitation to be a part of a dream – inviting them to give breath to a dream. She dreamed of a world where equality was the rule of law – a world where all people were welcome.<sup>v</sup>

For Bethune, stewardship – inviting people to share what they had to make a dream a reality – was about the way of authority, but not authority as people of privilege may first think of it. For Bethune, authority wasn't about *her* power, it was about the power of God from which her conviction in the dream originated. Stewardship then wasn't about passing on her authority to her investors – it wasn't about empowering her investors *at all*. For Bethune, stewardship was about giving people the opportunity to respond to an authority that sought a higher purpose – that sought a blessed community – that sought a world in which all of God's created shared in shalom – in peace and justice with one another. For Bethune, stewardship as the *way of authority* was about being a part of a dream that was established under the authority of God, witnessed in scripture and passed down through the lives of people of faith.

For Bethune, stewardship as the way of authority was about acknowledging that God is the only authority worth serving. And when we serve God's authority, we do not make the distinction between the wealthy and poor, those dressed in gold and those dressed in rags, those with and without pigment in their skin. When we serve God's authority, we welcome the opportunity to invest – to be trustees – to breath life into – and to share in the work of God's will – of God's way – of God's vision where all people know the deep love that is witnessed in the life, teaching, sacrifice, and resurrection of Christ.

Today, you are being invited to take part in that work. You are being invited to learn more about, and to claim a place in the work of God in this community. Downstairs you'll find the Fellowship Hall is packed with opportunities that name how we are living out God's vision for our church to *Make a Place for Everyone to Know God's Love*. You're being asked to consider participating as a steward of resources, to share in the ministry that God has laid out for us, that we can respond to God's authority by naming how we will use our time, and talent, and treasure to ensure that everyone is welcome at this table – at Christ's table.

In just a minute, Joel Wood is going to come up and talk a little about your financial commitment – he's going to invite you to consider how your financial gifts can help continue the work of God in this community through this church.

And then after worship, as you go downstairs, you will be invited to sign up and to claim your space in the ministry of making a place for everyone. The passion, gifts, knowledge, and expertise of everyone are necessary for us to fully be who God has called us to be.

James calls us in his text to not place a priority on any person, or subset of the population, but to welcome all, and invite all to share in the body of Christ.

Bethune calls us to see stewardship, how we respond with our gifts, as a way to submit to God's authority that the vision for how this church is called to serve this community may be fully realized.

And I call on you to realize the importance of the work to which we have been called, and how necessary it is for us all to engage in this work. Just last night, there was a bomb threat only four blocks away at Alfred Street Baptist Church as they gathered for evening worship. ... Thankfully, no one was hurt. But friends, we have work to do. In this world, there are many who still do not believe that God's love was meant for all. But for all the saints, who have taught us and professed, by the name of Christ all will be blessed. With the gifts of the community, shared in labor and love, we will *make a place where everyone knows God's love*. Alleluia, Alleluia. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Aaron L. Uitti. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Peter Rhea Jones. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> Kim Cliett Long. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ969859.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Sharon Rhodes-Wickett. *The Way of Authority*. pbumc.org. Retrieved October 31, 2018.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.