

If . . . you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Sit here, please," while you say to the poor one, "Stand there," have you not made distinctions among yourselves? Letter of James 2: 3-4.

Having had to place my wife into Assisted Living recently, I am reminded of a story written by Eudora Welty about a Campfire Girl's visit to elderly people in such a facility – *one not to be compared to the one where Jane now resides*. The story is titled "A Visit of Charity". It's about a fourteen year old Campfire Girl named Marian who, bearing a potted plant, pays a visit to an Old Ladies Home upon a wintry day. The nurse who opened the door was also dressed in white – like the snow. "I'm a Campfire Girl," said Marian. "I have to pay a visit to some old lady." (The visit was worth three points toward a merit badge.)

The nurse asked if she were acquainted with any specific residents. "With any old ladies? . . . No - but any of them will do." The nurse took her down a corridor to one of the rooms, "There are two in each room." "Two what?" asked Marian. Suddenly Marian was alone with two old women. One was feeble but up and about. With a claw like hand she plucked off Marian's hat. "Did you come to be our little girl for awhile?" she asked - and then snatched the potted plant. The other woman was lying flat in bed, cranky. "Stinkweeds," she said, referring to the plant. And so it went, with the one being cloyingly sweet and the other irritable. The tension in the room made Marian go rigid.

The irritable woman summoned Marian to her side. "Come here!" Marian trembled. The other woman explained: "She's mad because it's her birthday." "It's not my birthday," screamed the woman in bed. "No one knows when that is but myself and will you please be quiet or I'll go straight out of my mind!" Marian wondered about her for a moment "as though there was nothing else in the world to wonder about." It was the first time she had ever experienced anything like this. Then the old face in the pillow slowly collapsed. "Soft whispers came out . . she sounded like -- a little lamb." Surprised and embarrassed, Marian turned to the other woman and said, "She's crying!"

And with that she jumped up, grabbed her cap and, eluding the other lady's grasp, ran from the room, . . . past the nurse and out into the cold air. "Wait for me!" she shouted to a passing bus and jumped on; then sat down and took a bite of an apple she had hidden for herself.

We have all been somehow educated to repress our powers of perception, to shy away from pain. But to avoid intimate sharing, engagement with one another is to abort our capacity to become profound, fully human beings in the manner of Christ. Shared broken hearts have a way of becoming wonderfully open hearts. Of course, that's what a Church is meant to be - a place where, beneath the image of the crucified Christ, we may honestly exchange our pain and in the process discover ourselves to be not strangers at all but a family with so much in common.

Hopefully Marian will one day return to that Old Ladies Home with something more than a merit badge in mind.

Geoff Wood