

“Two Kinds of Wisdom” GPPC 9-23-18
Mark 9:30-37, James 3:13—4:3, 7-8

You may know that Martin Luther, the 16th century church reformer and pioneer of the Protestant Reformation, did not merely have a few minor misgivings about the Letter of James; he actually he hated it. You Bible students out there--what did he call it? “An epistle of straw.” Last Sunday, we heard James declare in chapter three, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” And Luther answered James, “Indeed you should have observed that yourself!” (E. Elizabeth Johnson in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4*, 63.) Zing!

Luther felt that James undercuts God’s grace with an overemphasis on works. And Luther thought that James should not have even been included in the Bible. So, of course, we’re spending three Sundays in a row reading James.

The larger church (and we could argue, the Holy Spirit) disagreed with Luther about the Letter of James. James never dismisses God’s grace. It simply reminds us, again and again, that if we truly have faith

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in God, and we really believe we have received the unmerited gift of God's forgiveness and love, then *surely* we will respond to God with thankful and obedient lives. And *surely* we will respond by caring for others, especially people in need. Won't we?

As the scholars point out, we don't actually know who wrote the Letter of James and there's no specific identifiable audience either. Instead, James is sort of like a sermon that focuses on Christian ethical behavior. Or we might think of it as wisdom literature. In this case, wisdom means a way of living life skillfully rather than foolishly.

Last Sunday, in the first part of chapter three, James reminded us to beware of the human tongue, how we speak to each other. Today, continuing in the same chapter, James addresses the subject of two kinds of wisdom.

Here's how he describes the first kind of wisdom. "But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but it earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind."

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So the first kind of wisdom is not actually wisdom at all, is it? It's a kind of pseudo-wisdom. And unfortunately it's a way of thinking and living that we are all too familiar with.

In the news recently, we've seen political figure after political figure indicted and convicted because of their "selfish ambition." These were people who were already wealthy but who chose to break the law in order to become even wealthier. These were tremendously influential people who could not be satisfied with their *legal* influence. Daily, we've also witnessed elected representatives who have power and prestige most people can scarcely imagine, but their words and policies are driven by "bitter envy" "selfish ambition," constant boasting, and lies that are harming our country and indeed the world. This is not wisdom from above. As James says it is "earthly, unspiritual, devilish."

Of course, the lens can be turned to other places as well. Even in the church we struggle with "bitter envy and selfish ambition." Imagine all the silly turf battles in the church over the years. Pastors and parishioners whose egos must constantly be stroked and who insist on having their way practically all the time. Conflicts and disputes spiral

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out of control rather be settled with Christian patience and love. And in our personal and family lives do we also grapple with “envy and selfish ambition,” bragging, and falsehood? This is the pseudo-wisdom James warns us about.

But thank God there’s another kind of wisdom, what James calls “wisdom from above.” He says it, “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”

This is true wisdom, not pseudo-wisdom. This is a life lived with a kind of divinely-inspired and empowered skill.

This life is “pure,” says James. The Greek word can also be translated as “holy.” Either way, “pure” and “holy” seem daunting, don’t they? Who goes around telling people that he’s living a “pure” life? Or she is living a “holy” life? But James is not suggesting we put on some sort of arrogant “holier than thou” attitude. He’s calling us to turn aside from the things that are destructive to humanity and the world and to

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turn to the things that increase the flourishing of humanity and creation as God's love at work in the world.

And that leads into the other descriptions. "Peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

In broad strokes, James continues to paint a portrait of a wise person. This person is peaceable, gentle, and willing to yield. In other words, this person is not wishy-washy, this wise one stands for something, but he or she is also not looking to have a battle all the time.

This person is looking for ways to pursue what is right without being nasty or being overbearing. And this person does not have to have things his or her way every time. He or she can yield sometimes.

This person is also merciful, willing to forgive just as he or she has been forgiven by other people and especially by God.

This person is focused on "good fruits," actually getting something useful said or done, rather than being focused on standing in the limelight or being focused on protecting ego.

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How important are these wisdom characteristics in marriages, partnerships, friendships, extended families, and churches? How crucial are they for those who would govern and lead us as a state and nation?

And James adds a few final touches to the wisdom canvas; he says the wise person is to live “without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

Some members of our church’s Justice and Peacemaking Committee recently led a book study on Debbie Irving’s book *Waking Up White* and then a number of us attended Irving’s lecture and Q and A on Monday at First Presbyterian, followed by a workshop there on Tuesday. I can only speak for myself, but every year I continue to be amazed to learn more about the history and depth of racism in our country, how we have systemically denied black and brown people equal opportunities in education, housing, employment, and the list goes on and on. Every year I’m learning more and it’s painful learning. But not as painful as for the people who have experienced our racism and prejudice. James calls us away from this evil.

Likewise, I can only speak for myself, but I continue to be surprised and saddened to see how we as a country and a world have

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treated women unfairly. It's been a battle for women to vote, for them to be treated fairly in the workplace, for them to have control of their bodies. And when it comes to sexual assault, serious accusations deserve serious investigations, don't they?

After all, James calls wise people to live “without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” There's no sense in claiming to love God and neighbor, if we don't try to treat our neighbors, all colors and genders, with fairness. Anything less is just pretend love; it's hypocrisy.

The good news is that wise living is possible. It comes “from above.” It's a gift from God, not something we conjure up by sheer force of human will. “Draw near to God,” says James, “And God will draw near to you.”

We believe that people actually can change. They can actually grow in wisdom. Usually it takes a long time and it happens over the years. As we gather as a people for worship. As we listen to God speaking through song, prayer, scripture and word proclaimed. As we have honest dialogue with each other—comforting and challenging each other. As we build deeper relationships with each other, especially

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people we may struggle with or with people who have been treated unfairly by our partiality.

Can you think of some people in our congregation who you believe are especially wise? Don't just think of the usual suspects. Are there others? Maybe they are people you wish you could learn from, imitate, and that you wish our young people knew, and imitated, if they got to be around them. Maybe you are one of those wise people yourself.

Can you and I see some ways that we are living wisely now? Can we also see some areas in which we need God to help us grow to be more "pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy"?

This week let's pray for God to take away the foolishness in our lives and to make us wise to be instruments of God's love in a world desperately in need of wisdom, wisdom from above. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal