

## Live Well, Live Wisely

**Let's begin by hearing again the James passage – this time from 'The Message:**

<sup>13-16</sup> Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom—it's animal cunning, devilish conniving. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats.

<sup>17-18</sup> Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results *only* if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.

Alan Brehm, *The Waking Dreamer*, 2009 wrote:

"The kind of wisdom the Scriptures envision is a way of life that is born of walking humbly with God. It is a way of life that is inspired by the presence of God's Spirit. When you live in such a way that you are consciously aware of God's presence, it tends to create a sense of inner strength; but it is always a strength that manifests itself in gentleness, in humility, in self-sacrifice, and in kindness."

The big and essential question that engages us in this reading from James is announced in its opening verse: Who is the wise person? And what's to know?

Actually the reading is simply continuing the reflection on true and false wisdom I touched on last week that encompasses this central portion of the epistle of James. As usual the answer that comes is ostensibly simple and direct: good works are the mark of one who possesses wisdom. In so many words, you will know wisdom by its fruits. As usual, the author of James's theology is practical and down to earth.

We don't know everything we'd like to about this book of James, we're not even really sure when it was written, or if the James who wrote it is the same "James" as the brother of Jesus. But what is clear is that James's audience was having problems. They weren't living together well. They weren't being kind or generous. They weren't bearing each other's burdens or treating one another as they would like to be treated. They weren't even listening to each other, but just talking loudly and carrying on as if they had on blinders, as if they were the only people in the world. They weren't showing wisdom to one another, that's for sure. It happens, from time to time, that lectionary passages mesh so well with what's going on in contemporary society that one can really see the Spirit at work. This may be one of those weeks. James writes about the wisdom of civility and gentleness ... and we read it in our own context... of tens of thousands on the move from the Middle East, greeted with open arms by some and barb wire and racial slurs by others,... a week in which our political leaders got a last chance to extend their claws and draw blood from one another. Yes, I'd say we could use a good shot of wisdom these days locally, nationally and internationally.

A lot of the book of James is about action. Of course it contains the famous verse (to the great annoyance of Martin Luther) 'faith without works is dead'... telling us to be doers of the word and not hearers only. But ultimately James isn't so much about doing things, or just doing things but about how one does things. Wisdom, for James, is a way of life. Or as Robert Wall put it: "The Letter of James, reverberating with themes of biblical wisdom from ancient Israel through the traditions of Jesus and Paul, calls us to be a wise community that walks and talks the "wisdom from above."

Wisdom is a word that gets used a lot these days. For James, wisdom is holistic.

Faith and works.

Thought and deed.

Context and situation.

Holy and lowly.

Personal and communal.      Maybe that's what makes wisdom so hard to handle.

Wisdom here is a whole way of life. And James makes it clear: a way of life that comes from God.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus' interaction with the disciples about their argument over who would be greatest is almost comic! Jesus turned their goals on their head and told them if they wanted to be "the best" in the Kingdom, then they should become the servant of everybody else. And just in case they didn't get the practical implications, he took a child and said that the way they treated *that* child determined the quality of their commitment

to the Kingdom. Now, what you have to understand was a child was someone you could treat however you wanted in the ancient world and nobody would be the wiser. Maybe that was the devilish temptation at residential schools where how a child was mistreated would never be believed by the good people that supported such schools. Jesus said that the true test of one's character is how you treat those who have absolutely no recourse, who cannot "report" you to anyone. In Jesus' perspective, true wisdom, true strength, true greatness is found in the kindness you show to the most vulnerable people in our world. And both reconciliation and refugees immediate come to mind if you're looking for a way to practice what is being preached.

In verse 15 James contrasts wisdom from above "Godly wisdom" with wisdom from below, "earthly wisdom." James probably understood 'earthly wisdom' very differently than we do today, but his point is still current: there are forces in the world working for wisdom, and there are forces that - at least to our mortal eyes - seem to be working for ill. Now it's important not to jump to the conclusion that only spiritual things are good. Ultimately James is saying that wisdom from God looks very different than the wisdom of the world. He's calling for humility if we think our view of wisdom is exactly what God has in mind.

James is instructing Christians how to live with one another. In the epistle two things are an absolute given. One: accountability to God. And two: accountability to one another. God and neighbour. I bet you've heard that somewhere before. Jesus called it the greatest commandment. As in much wisdom literature, the implied question the text addresses is, "How can I live the good life?" And, like much similar literature, the answer lies in the paradox that the good life cannot be found by seeking it directly; rather, when one seeks wisdom, the good life will follow. Above all, wisdom is a gift.

**Wisdom as practical gift** Wisdom is intensely practical. James has already stated that its presence is to be seen in the good works that it produces. And now (verses 14-18) the practical "consequences" of true and false wisdom are exposed. False wisdom is to be seen in selfish ambition, envy, and boastfulness. That is to say, it is self-centered and inward looking, "earthly," "unspiritual," and "demonic" to use James' language (James 3:15). The true wisdom that comes from above as God's gift, on the other hand, is marked by a practical purity that is evidenced in qualities of peacefulness, gentleness, willingness to yield to the other, mercy, and other good fruits that are devoid of partiality and hypocrisy. Not surprising nor a matter of apology that these qualities sound very much like what common sense would identify as goodness. Because that is the way of wisdom. It is a summation all that common sense would identify as the marks of

wholeness in human relationships, as the very best of God's gifts in creation. Nor, interestingly, should it be surprising that these qualities sound very much like those qualities that Paul in his letter to the Galatians identifies as the "fruit" of the Spirit -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

James's special emphasis, then, is that wisdom cannot be found unless it is pursued in a spirit of meekness and humility. Meekness is necessary for wisdom, which in turn leads to the good life. What a countercultural message for our own day, in which so many seem to believe that "the good life" cannot be realized unless one is important, a recognized leader in one's field or one's community!

For James, wisdom is never about individual accomplishment or prestige, wisdom has to do with living together in this crazy/blessed world of ours, living together and serving God and one another. William Barclay once said: "There is a kind of person who is undoubtedly clever, with an acute brain and a skillful tongue. But his effect, nevertheless, in any committee, in any church, in any group is to cause trouble and to disturb personal relationships. It's a sobering thing to remember that the wisdom that he possesses is devilish rather than divine."

As individuals, we can study the Bible, pray often. We can seek to study the faith, and struggle with our own beliefs. We can remember that being a Christian might include attending weekly worship, but the tough work really begins when we leave those doors. We can put ourselves in places where we see God at work in the world.

And then, as a congregation, we can try to be wise together. So with scripture as our guide, with God leading the way, with the entire community of this congregation and beyond, I look forward to discerning wise ways of following Christ in this place. I don't know where God will take us, but I'm certain of something: if we go there together, bearing one another's burdens, seeking good for the community of faith, we will go with God. And there is no deeper wisdom than this. Ask God for wisdom that you need to face the numerous decisions that are making. We need the wisdom of God to make right decisions and help us to do what is right. We are to pray for God's wisdom and that wisdom will be granted to us.

Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts.