

You don't know what you don't know

James 3:1-13-4:3, 7-8a

September 19, 2021

Year B

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born 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 is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above 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 for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes from among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your own pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

This is the word of the Lord. May God, who is rich in mercy, grant us insight into this word, and with that insight, faith and courage for the living of our days. Amen.

When it comes to deciding which text to preach on, I'm usually a gospel person. Many of you know that here at Saint Mark we usually follow the weekly lectionary, a three-year cycle of weekly texts that include an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, a Gospel reading and a reading from one of the Epistles, one of the letters in the New Testament. I rarely choose anything but the gospel. I love exploring the stories of Jesus' life and what his life can teach us about how to live today. I don't think I had ever preached on James until a few weeks ago.

I'm kind of embarrassed to admit that I did not realize what a compelling, timely and pertinent book James is until we started preparing for our Bible study on it. Dr. Martha Moore-Keish, who led our study on Monday night, gives some great reasons to read the book of James right now¹.

In his short book (only five chapters!), James discusses migration and refugees, religious diversity and conflict, living in community with others, and concern for the

¹ Moore-Keish, Martha. *James; Belief: A theological commentary on the Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2019.

poor and the sick, for those at the margins of society and community. James invites us to reflect on our own practices and how we might be participating in a society that neglects and isolates the powerless. It feels like James could be writing to us today.

Wisdom is the way James invites us to do that reflection. James uses the words wisdom, law and word all interchangeably. For James, Dr. Moore-Keish says, they all refer to that which God gives us to guide our lives. The wisdom of God, the law of God and the word of God all shape us and form us to be who God is calling us to be. It is the wisdom of God, not the wisdom of the world, that is meant to lead us as we go about our daily lives.

James mentions wisdom frequently in his five short chapters. In chapter 1 he says, "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you." He goes on to say "ask in faith, never doubting."

From the very beginning of his letter, by making a connection between faith and wisdom, James prepares the reader for his main theme, the relationship between faith and works, or faith and practice. Ethical living, for James, is born of faith and wisdom. To be wise is not to be enlightened, but to live according to the law of God: to care for your neighbor as yourself. This is not the wisdom that the world gives us, but the wisdom that God gives us.

James asks. "Who is wise and understanding among you?"

How would we answer that? What comes to mind first for me is: not the ones who spout words, but the ones who show wisdom with their lives.

There just so much constant chatter, and what are we getting from it?

The other day I had to turn off NPR as I was driving to the church because it feels like politicians are simply talking to hear themselves talk, not to impart any wisdom but to underscore just how right they are. Just because someone is the loudest in the room does not mean they are the wisest in the room.

One of the reasons James is so great to read right now is because he is talking to a divided society. He is deeply frustrated with his audience for their failure to recognize the seriousness of the conflict that they really do face. Instead of "rebuking the devil" we are rebuking and harming our neighbors—the very people God has called us to love.

Maybe the beginning of wisdom is admitting that we don't know. We can't find the wisdom that guides our life here on earth. All we can find here is selfish ambition,

wickedness, disorder, envy, partiality or hypocrisy. (Again, it sounds like this letter could have been written to us today!)

We know nothing, but God knows everything.

When we can let go of control and fear and the desire to know it all, that is when we can draw closer to God. Our “cravings,” as James says, are what separate us from God.

When I look beyond Ben and Jerry’s and french fries I can acknowledge that the cravings that rule separate me from God are certainty, control; I crave the power to manage every aspect of my own life and of the lives of those around me. I know when my prayers revolve around that, I’m not being faithful.

In his commentary on James, New Testament scholar Robert Wall writes that “A good and gracious God simply does not respond to petitions motivated by self-centered commitments; such prayer is idolatrous, even blasphemous, because it renders God as mere provider of pleasure rather than as sovereign covenant partner².”

God is not the one who is here to give us everything we want. God is not a justification for our actions that persecute and exclude. God’s wisdom is not racist or sexist or queer-phobic.

It might sound nice to worship a god who lives only satisfy our own desires. In fact, there is an entire theology that can credit its success to preaching about that god. But that is not the God that James is talking about. That is not the God that we know through Jesus Christ.

The God to whom James bears witness is the God of wisdom, the God who *is* wisdom. This wisdom gives birth to gentleness in our lives toward others. James describes wisdom from above as peaceable, gentle and willing to yield. That is not the wisdom of the world.

In his letter, James praises those who not just say peace, but those who make peace. Does making peace or being willing to yield mean being passive in the face of injustice?

Certainly not. James’ explicit concern for “widows and orphans” should check any effort to use this call for peace against those who rally for justice. Dr. Moore-Keish points out that Frederick Douglass quotes this verse ten times in his antislavery speeches, saying that there can be “no peace where there was oppression, injustice or outrage upon the right—none but the most hollow and deceitful peace could ever

² Wall, Robert W. *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James*. Trinity Press, Valley Forge PA, 1997. (From Connections Commentary; Year B, Vol. 3, p 329)

exist between the man who was on his back on the ground, and the man who stood on his neck with his heel." Centuries after James wrote this letter, over 150 years after Frederick Douglass quoted him, this call to work for justice is still very much a part of the Christian life³.

As Christians we are called to make peace. But that doesn't mean we are called to sit back, for making peace is an active enterprise, interwoven with the effort to establish justice.

James believes that, like peace, true wisdom is active. It is something that must be shown, and not merely spoken⁴. Those who claim to have faith don't need to announce it, because their lives will make it clear. James invites us to reflect on our lives with this question as our guide: Do our lives make our faith clear?

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

May it be so. Amen.

³ Moore-Keish, 136

⁴ ibid