

Sermon Get Smart. September 20, 2015

Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above. Instead, it is from the earth, natural and demonic. Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder, and everything that is evil. What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts. What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes? Don't they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives? You long for something you don't have, so you commit murder. You are jealous for something you can't get, so you struggle and fight. You don't have because you don't ask. You ask and don't have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings. Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will run away from you. Come near to God, and God will come near to you. James 3:13-4:3, 7-8

James writes to us, to the church, about wisdom. What's some of the wisdom you learned from your mother, or from your kindergarten teacher? "Hold hands when you cross the street. If you don't have anything nice to say... don't say anything at all. Eat your vegetables. Wipe your nose with a hankie instead of your sleeve. Say please and thank you." That's the nicer side of conventional wisdom... the uglier side of conventional wisdom is things like "Do unto others before they can do unto you. The one with the most toys wins. Bigger is better. You can't be too rich or too beautiful. Take no prisoners. Don't get mad, get even." James was delving deeper into wisdom, who is mentioned over 200 times in the pages of scripture (often as a living being, a feminine pronoun) as a godly virtue. Christian wisdom, James wrote, is peaceful, gentle, merciful, good, fair, and genuine.

Last night 21 of us gathered at the parsonage for dinner and to talk about what it is to be a United Methodist Christian. I love to share John Wesley's theology of availing ourselves of the means of grace because it is practical theology... it's spiritual wisdom. If you don't know, John Wesley was the reluctant founder of Methodism (a work mocking Wesley and his friends by their fellow students at Oxford University because of their methodical practices of holiness.) Wesley didn't set out to form a new denomination but to call the Anglican Church to return to holiness. (The Anglicans asked him to leave.)

Wesley believed that God's grace (that is God's love and mercy and kindness) is a free gift, and also that we can avail ourselves of the means of grace. By our faith practices we can experience more, and deeper, grace. And joy. And holiness. This is practical theology. This is practical Christian wisdom as well.

Wesley called Christian practices the means of grace (among them corporate worship, sharing in the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, reading scripture, holy conversation, prayer, sharing our faith journey with someone else "watching over each other in love") and works of mercy (feeding the sick, clothing the naked, sharing

our physical and financial resources with those in need.) Without these practices, Wesley felt, and I've experienced this, we are... we tend to be... Christian in name only. We are unmoored, disconnected from the One who has the power to transform our lives.

James also called the church to deeper and truer holiness. He wrote this letter to the church about practical wisdom in how we deal with each other. You'll remember that the Apostle Paul, author of many of the most important epistles in the bible – letters of wisdom and instruction to the early church – believed most firmly that we are saved by grace through faith alone. James was also an author of wisdom and instruction to the early church, who believed most firmly that faith is made evident and alive through our good works. James tells us that that faith and good works can't be separated.

In this letter James described good works of wisdom that are pure, peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. I wonder what it would look like if all of our dealings with each other were pure, peaceful, gentle, filled with mercy and goodness, fair, and genuine. I wondered, when I read James' letter, about preaching about how we ought to act in order for outsiders to notice and marvel at us. (Remember what was said about the early church? "See how they love each other.") How we live and deal within the church, and within the world, is meant to make a statement about who we are, the Jesus we follow, the God we belong to.

Sometimes scripture brings me to my knees with gratitude, with joy, and sometimes with humility. This letter from James about wisdom brings me to my knees in humility. Reading and writing about godly wisdom shows me the glaring lack of wisdom in my own life.

When I was a little girl I loved to wear my parents' shoes... I'd put on my mother's high heels or my father's shiny, black military shoes and clomp around in them. They were too big for me but I was imagining what I'd look like when I was a grown up and could wear such amazing, wonderful, big shoes. I think the attraction to the big shoes was also because they belonged to "my" grownups. I was indentifying with them, and imagining them in those shoes... as I tried to walk in their footsteps.

Sometimes the shoes of Christian faith seem huge to me... the size of clown shoes... that I'll never fit into. I can put them on and pretend they're mine but I'm still clomping around in shoes that are way, way too big for me. But James' letter is not meant to bring us to our knees in discouragement or humility at how often we fail to show godly wisdom in dealing with each other. It's meant to give us a pair of big shoes to wear around and imagine ourselves, in all our actions, with pure, peaceful, gentle, merciful, good, fair, genuine wisdom. Wearing the big shoes of Christian faith we can imagine and identify with Jesus... as we practice walking in His footsteps.

That Wesleyan word again, that word found over and over again in the pages of scripture and the lives of saints: practice. We practice faith. We learn to walk in shoes that are too big for us... we identify with the One the shoes belong to... the One we desire to walk with and imitate ... Jesus.

This week (rather than the nebulous "sometime")... *this week* pick one of wisdom's attributes to wear around at a time to practice godliness. The big shoes of peace. The big shoes of mercy. The big shoes of gentleness. The big shoes of mercy. The big shoes of goodness. The big shoes of fairness. The big shoes of genuineness.

And pray. Pray for godly wisdom in all your dealings with others. Prayer is a means of grace... a faith practice. Share with someone else which the big shoes of faith you're clomping around in so you're being held in someone else's prayer. And then let's watch over each other in love (a Wesleyan expression) and remind each other (with gentleness and humility and love) when we're seen clomping around in conventional wisdom that says, "My way or the highway. You hurt me, I'll hurt you. I gave you a chance and you blew it." Let's remind each other that James wrote this letter to the church.... that is, to you and me, and that the way to learn godly wisdom is to practice it. To practice it together.

James says wisdom happens when we submit to God. To submit is to yield, to let go. To submit to God is to yield to God's will, and to let go of whatever conventional wisdom is opposed to God's will. James assumes that the church understands (and so he has no need to outline) God's will... that we love God with all our passion and strength and intelligence, and we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Jesus said all the Law and the prophets hang on these pegs of love, which is the greatest commandment. So wisdom happens when we love.

And finally, James gives us a last piece of wisdom. This is the key, the kerygma (that is, the good news,) the nugget of gold in his letter, hidden in plain sight at the bottom. Draw near to God, James says, and God will come near to you.

John Wesley believed that faith is an exercise of the heart and the hands. I think of it as an arm exercise, and I invite you to do it with me. It's low impact and you can sit while doing it. Methodist Christian theology stretches up an arm, a heart, and mind, to God. We do all we can to avail ourselves of the means of grace. With this arm held up we remember that worship, prayer, bible study, holy conversation, singing, silence, sharing our faith, and a host of other spiritual practices, draw us close to God. Our theology also stretches out an arm to do all we can to avail ourselves of the works of mercy. With this arm we reach out to a world in need. We remember that feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, working for peace and justice, sharing our resources, caring for the earth, inviting the outsider in, and a host of other spiritual practices, draw the world to God.

This week put on a big pair of wisdom's shoes and clomp around in them. Pray. And draw near to God. Do all you can to avail yourselves (that is *practice!*) the means of grace (draw close to God) and the works of mercy (draw the world to God.) Amen.