

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 22 2024

James 3:13--4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Just as there are two reigns- the reign of heaven and the reign of the world. The author of James says there are two kinds of wisdom. Wisdom from below and wisdom from above. The wisdom of the reign of the world and the wisdom of the reign of God.

The wisdom from below is characterized by bitter envy and selfish ambition filled with boasting and falseness. James says this wisdom, this way of living and behaving, is from the earth, is unspiritual (from the physical life alone), and demon like.

When these things guide us there is dis-order, things are unstable, and it brings forth wickedness/worthless things of every kind. The wisdom of the reign of the world brings dis-order.

The wisdom from above is pure (defined in chapter 1 not as ritual purity, but the purity Jesus in Mark 7 says comes from within, from the human heart) such as looking after widows and orphans in their distress. Purity is other centered. The wisdom of the reign of heaven is peaceable (wholeness), gentle in the sense of equitable fairness, willing to yield/compromise, filled to the brim with mercy (compassion even when we could hold to account)

and good fruits (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). The wisdom from above is all of these things without a hint of partiality or hypocrisy.

This is the wisdom Jesus embodies. That Jesus lives. That Jesus calls us to follow him in.

James then points to the reality around his readers. Where do these conflicts (wars) and disputes (fights) among you come from? They come from your own hedonism- cravings for pleasure that cause conflict not only externally but internally. You want something and can't have it, like David and Bathsheba, you commit murder for it. You covet something that doesn't belong to you and cannot get it, so you go to war over it like Russia in Ukraine. This is the wisdom of the world and leads to dis-order.

You want the return of order? Stability? You want the wisdom from above. And to get that, have humility before God. Place yourselves under God's reign. Know your place in the world. Part of how we do this is we stop following the devil. Literally stand still, just say "No" and the devil will flee. Draw near to God, James says, and you will find that God is already there. As one author put it, "Those who acknowledge their dependence on God will receive the grace to overcome the passions that distort

human life.” A colleague used the image of the Prodigal Father, who on seeing his son from the distance returning, runs to him—kill the fatted calf! Rejoicing! This is how God is with us. Always.

On Wednesday, someone despaired because everything they did was from selfish ambition. When asked what they meant they elaborated. I go to school to be a plumber because you can earn some good money there and that will lead to a good life for me, etc. So, their conclusion was, everything I do is selfish.

But is that what James is getting at here? I think not. This echoes what I’ve been saying unto you all for months now when we share places we have used our gifts in the world this week. It is not boasting to claim a gift God has given you. Every one of you have specific gifts God has given you. Gifts of working with your hands, or your head. Gifts of administration and organizing, gifts of hospitality, of listening, of healing. To not acknowledge those gifts, and that they are from God, is to claim them as your own, that’s selfish. Joan Chittister puts it, “humility is the admission of God’s gifts to me and the acknowledgment that I have been given them for others.”

So, while I may be compensated well for my skills as a plumber, my goal is to use them for the betterment of the life of others. Everybody needs a flushing toilet and hot water.

This gets at the Lutheran understanding of vocation. Calling. In his work *Freedom of the Christian* Luther writes that followers of Jesus, “needs none of these things [good works] for his righteousness and salvation. Therefore, he should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and advantage of his neighbor.”

Luther believed that *any work* conducted in faith, with humility, is an opportunity to reflect love of God and love of neighbor. A mother who is a homemaker provides food, clothing, and a well-kept home for her closest neighbors—her children and spouse. A plumber provides quality work to her customers and a reasonable living to anyone she might employ. The farmer supplies healthy food for the greater community.

God’s desire is for us to be fed, housed, clothed. And does not begrudge us a living. What keeps us humble is that pull into relationship to others. I use the gifts that God has given me to be the best burger flipper, grocery bagger, cashier, accountant,

truck driver, carpenter, student etc. that I can be so my work benefits my neighbor. And if I receive a good living because of that, great! But all I need is my daily bread. And God's promise is that I will always have that.

Our reading from Mark gets at this tension between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of the reign of God.

Jesus asks what the disciples were talking about on the way. Again, I think the better translation is that they were having a debate about what made a person, "great".

Jesus knew what the wisdom of the world said. It is much like how the world, perhaps even ourselves, would answer the question today. Greatness came from having and exercising power. Of effecting great change through that power of money, political power, the power that comes through violence used and threatened. The GOATS dominate others- Michael Jordan, Tom Brady, Caitlin Clark? The disciples are still stuck on the definition of Messiah from last week. This muscular, dominating, triumphant figure.

Jesus then defines what the wisdom of the reign of God says about greatness. Aspire not to be first, but last of all and to serve all. Extend hospitality, food, welcome to those who have

no apparent worth in society. Who literally aren't considered worth spending the money on. Who don't deserve it because... And interestingly enough, Jesus says, you will find that in drawing near to these folks, you will find you have drawn near to Jesus (presaging Matthew 25).

And when you do these things. You will receive an abundant harvest of right relationships- with your neighbors and with God. And this, Jesus says, this is what lasts. That is life.

What will it profit you if you have 2 billion dollars but get to the end and find that is all that you have. That in doing so you have lost that most precious gift of life.

Indeed, what can you give in return for your life? Can you buy it with money? With power? With violence? No. Your life has been bought by the love of God in Jesus. A love that found victory on the cross. That is the wisdom of God, even though it looks like foolishness to the world.

As followers of Jesus who happen to be Lutheran, we know that these two wisdoms are always at war in us. That, like the disciples in Mark, one minute we are selflessly out using our gifts for the good of our neighbor. The next, we are dismissing that

person over there because of how they look, or act, or where they are from.

But, we have the waters of baptism into which we can dip every day. Waters that remind us of the truth of who we are. Beloved child of God gifted by God with unique talents and abilities for the sake of the world. A reminder that we live in the reign of God. That we have been given in Jesus and through baptism the wisdom of God.

A wisdom that moves us to be other centered. That produces peace within you and others. That leads us to be equitable and fair. That gives us a willingness to hear others and compromise with them. That fills us to the brim with mercy and the good fruits of the Spirit. A wisdom that can bring an end to the disorder around us and within us.

We have a God who always welcomes us with open arms when we turn to God after squandering our inheritance and going off in pursuit of power, money, fame. Who always kills the fatted calf and says, my beloved child you are home! Let us celebrate!

In this time and in this Meal God welcomes you home. Let us celebrate!