

PENTECOST 18B – 9/23/18

Be Wise

(James 3:13-4:3, 7-8)

We continue our sermon series this morning on the lectionary readings from the book of James in the NT. James, as we've already noted was not one of the two disciples who had that name, but instead was actually the younger brother of Jesus. And he was not so much a "theologian" per se, but rather a "pastor" who was more concerned with helping people *live out* their faith than he was trying to *describe* or *explain* that faith.

So what have we heard from James thus far? Well, first of all – when it comes to the faith – "Just Do It!" says James. Put what you believe into action. Then, in week two, we heard James tell his parishioners that there were to be "No Favorites" in their midst; in other words, treating some people better than others. And last week his message was "Watch Your Tongue." Be careful with your words, and how you speak to people. Be encouraging and affirming, not mean and hurtful.

And James, as we heard just a few moment ago, opens our reading *this* morning by asking the question, "Who is *wise* and understanding among you?" Now there are any number of definitions or understandings of just what *constitutes* wisdom, aren't there? For some, of course, wisdom is "knowledge." For others, it's "insight." But the definition that I like best, and that I believe best fits *today's* reading is "good sense or judgment." In other words, what James seems to be asking here is: "Who has *good sense or judgment* among you?"

Because “wisdom” is not really the same as “knowledge,” or even “intelligence,” is it? A quick story to illustrate my point: A minister, a Boy Scout, and the genius founder of a high-tech computer firm were the only passengers on a small airplane. The pilot came back and informed them that the plane was about to crash and that, unfortunately, there were only three parachutes for the four people on board.

The pilot then added, “I think *I* should have one of the parachutes because I have a wife and three small children.” And, with that, he grabbed one of the parachutes and jumped out of the plane.

The computer whiz spoke up next. “*I* should have one of the parachutes as well because I am the smartest man in the world and everyone needs me.” And, with that, he *too* grabbed one of the parachutes and jumped out of the plane.

Finally, the minister turned to the Boy Scout and said with a sad smile, “Son, you are young with your whole life ahead of you, while I am old and have lived a long and fulfilling life. So you go ahead and take the last parachute, and *I* will go down with the plane.”

But the Boy Scout interrupted him and said, “Relax, Reverend, the smartest man in the world just jumped out of the plane with my backpack.” Again, wisdom and intelligence are *not* the same thing!

Wisdom, of course, is an important concept or attribute in the Bible. St. Paul, for example, talked about wisdom in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians where, much like James did in today’s reading, he *also* asked the question, “Where is the one who is wise?” And Paul then goes

on to say, “Consider your call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by *human standards...*” In other words, Christians are called to a *different* kind of wisdom than the kind of wisdom that the world typically values. In fact, says Paul, Christ became for us wisdom *from* God.

Elsewhere in the Bible, this idea that wisdom comes directly from God is also heard. Psalm 111:10 says “The fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who *do* his commandments...” Fear, here, does not mean “dread,” or “terror,” but rather “awe” or “respect,” or “reverence.” In other words, *the awe and respect and reverence* of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And this is then demonstrated by those who take seriously and obey God’s commandments in their lives.

Now, as we have already heard in previous weeks, James was the consummate pastor concerned more with teaching his people about actually *living out* the Christian faith than just talking about grand *theological* concepts. That was once again made clear this morning when he follows up his initial question about “who is wise” by stating, “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness *born* of wisdom.” *True* wisdom, then – at least according to James – is demonstrated by lives of gentleness and good works.

Having said this, James now addresses the exact *opposite* of “gentleness born of wisdom”; something that was as much of a problem in *his* day, apparently, as it is in our own. “*But...*” he says, “if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.” In other words, bitter envy and selfish ambition *do not* represent true, God-given, wisdom.

What's more, says James, "Such wisdom does not come from *above*, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish" even. "For where there is envy and selfish ambition," says James, "there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind." (Now hold onto that thought for just a moment, because we're going to come back to it in a little bit.)

Proverbs 14:30 puts it this way: "A heart at peace gives life to the body, but *envy* rots the bones." Or there is also an old Greek proverb that echoes this when it says, "Just as rust corrupts iron, so envy *corrupts* man."

Envy and selfish ambition are pretty much "kissing cousins," aren't they? Or, we might say, envy is often *born* of selfish ambition. In other words, it's sort of like saying, "I like what you've got. I *don't like* that you have it. And I *want it!*"

In the spirit of comedian Jeff Foxworthy, famous for his routine, "You might be a redneck *if...*" a fellow by the name of Sherm Nichols has come up with "You might be *selfish* if..."

You might be selfish if...

- You have a genuinely difficult time letting someone else have the TV remote. (Unfortunately, I'm definitely guilty of this one!)
- You pick up the last piece of fried chicken, take a bite out of it, then hold it up and say, "Does anybody want this?"
- You know all the words and all the verses to the Frank Sinatra song, "I Did It My Way."
- You have a lifetime subscription to *Self* magazine.
- Your favorite picture at home is the mirror. And finally...

- You're on a date and you say, "Enough talk about me... let's talk about what *you* think of me."

But envy and selfish ambition, as we heard, lead to all sorts of problems, says James. Because you can't have it both ways, can you? In other words, you can't *have* and demonstrate that gentleness born of wisdom, and yet *also* be envious and selfish at the same time.

In fact, there's an old West African proverb that says, "The man who tries to walk two roads... will split his pants." In other words, you can't follow *God's* ways, and also the ways of the *world* at the same time. It's just not possible.

That's the point that *James* is also trying to get across here as well. "But wisdom from above," he says – that is, this wisdom from God we've been talking about – "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."

Well, all of this – everything that James has been talking about up until now – leads us to his *next* point; perhaps his *main* point. And here again he asks *another* question, just as he did at the very beginning of today's reading: "Those conflicts and disputes among you," he asks, "where do they come from?"

Now we'd *like* to think, of course, that church conflict, for example, is a rather *recent* phenomenon. That, somehow, in the early church everyone played nice and got along with each other; all of the time. But the *fact* of the matter is that church conflict has been around for a very

long time, from the very *beginning* of the church even. Because it obviously existed in James' time as well.

And here is where we want to pick up again what James had to say about envy and selfish ambition a little bit earlier. And also the disorder and wickedness they *can*, and *will*, cause. These conflicts and disputes, asks James, "Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?" In other words, he says, "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."

Envy and selfish ambition, you see, can cause people to do a lot of crazy things. Perhaps a good example of envy and selfish ambition is what happened years ago when that large statue of Christ was erected high in the Andes Mountains on the border between Argentina and Chile. It's called "Christ of the Andes." Anyway, this statue was intended to symbolize a solemn pledge between the two countries. That, for as long as this statue stands, there will be *peace* between Argentina and Chile.

But shortly after the statue was erected, the Chileans began to complain, and to protest that they had been slighted because the statue has its *back* turned towards Chile. Well, just when tempers were at their highest, and the controversy threatened to completely undo what the statue was intended to symbolize in the first place, a Chilean newspaper writer saved the day. In an editorial, that not only defused the entire situation, but also made people laugh, he simply wrote, "The reason *why* the statue of Christ faces Argentina and not Chile... is that the people of Argentina need more *watching over* than the people of Chile."

What causes fights and quarrels among you, asks James. Don't they come from your wants and desires that battle within you? And, what's more, when *my* desires conflict with *your* desires, and when I don't get what I *want*, then the sparks begin to fly, don't they? And when *that* happens, it can get messy. And in a hurry!

For an ancient writer, James was pretty sharp and intuitive, wasn't he? In essence he's saying here that unresolved issues in our *own* lives are often at the very heart of our disputes with others! And, what's more, the basic problem, he says, is that you don't know how to pray.

At her church's weekly prayer meeting, this one woman kept asking for the same thing over and over again. "Lord, please get rid of all the cobwebs in my life." I assume that she was asking here for some clarity and focus in her life. But every week, the same prayer.

Finally, one of the men in the prayer meeting lost his patience. He got so fed up hearing that same prayer from her over and over again, week after week, that he offered up his *own* prayer: "Lord, forget about all those cobwebs. **JUST KILL THE SPIDER!**"

Again, you have to pray *correctly*, says James. And for the right reasons, and with the correct motivation. "You do not have, because you do not ask," he wrote. And, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly..." Why? Because, here again, all-too-often we remain entirely caught up in our envy and selfish ambition. In other words, we often want what we don't and, perhaps, *can't* have. When James writes, "...in order to spend what you get on your pleasures," he's referring, again, here to our selfish desires.

So what's the answer? The solution? "Submit yourselves therefore to God," writes James. The Greek word translated as "submit" here is actually a military term meaning "to arrange troops in a military fashion under the command of a leader or officer." To submit to God, therefore, is to, in effect, take our *orders* from God; to obey or do as we are commanded.

James explains even further, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands; purify your hearts. Once again, we come back to wisdom; to that good sense or judgment. True wisdom is to be found, then, in following and cultivating our relationship with God; to take our marching orders *from* God, and not be led or motivated by our own selfish desires.

But in order to do this, however, to submit to God and to become wise, we have to simultaneously resist the devil. "Resist the devil," says James, "and he will flee from you."

Once, when Martin Luther was asked how *he* overcame the devil, he replied, "Well, when he comes knocking at the door of my heart, and he asks, 'Who lives here?' I answer the devil, 'Martin Luther *used* to live here, but now he has moved out. Now my Lord Jesus *Christ* lives here.'" And upon hearing that, the devil, says Luther, "takes flight immediately."

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you... Naturalist Craig Childs once described an experience he had while doing research on the mountain lions of the Blue Range Wilderness in Arizona. As he approached a water hole from downwind he spotted a mountain lion drinking water. But the mountain lion did not know, at first, that he was

there. So, when it finished drinking, it walked away into a cluster of junipers.

After a few minutes, Childs walked over to the water hole to identify tracks in the mud and to record his notes. But, just before he bent down to look closer, he scanned the perimeter, and there among the shadows of the junipers, about thirty feet away, he saw a pair of eyes trained right on him. It was the mountain lion.

Now he expected the lion to run away, but instead it walked out into the sunlight toward him. So Childs pulled out his knife and stared back into the eyes of the mountain lion. He knew what he had to do. And, more importantly, he also knew what he must *not* do. He writes:

“Mountain lions are known to take down animals six, seven, eight times their size. Their method? Attack from behind, clamp onto the spine at the base of the prey’s skull, and snap it. The top few vertebrae are the target, housing respiratory and motor skills that cease instantly when the cord is cut. Mountain lions have stalked people for miles,” he says. Once a woman survived an attack, and escaped by foot on a road. But the lion took a shortcut and snuck up behind her and killed her several miles *down* that road.”

In this instance, Childs says, “I decided to hold firm to my ground and to not even intimate that I will back off. If I run, it is certain. I will have a mountain lion all over me. If I give it my back, I will only briefly feel its weight on me against the ground. Its teeth will open my vertebrae without even breaking a single bone.

“The mountain lion begins to my left, and *I* turn, keeping my face on it, my knife at my right side. It paces to my right, trying to get around on my other side, to get behind me. So I turn right, staring at it the whole time. My stare is about the only defense I have.”

The amazing thing was that Childs was actually able to maintain that defense all the while as the mountain lion continued to try and provoke him to run, turning left, then right, back and forth, again and again, until it ended up a mere ten feet away... Finally, the stand-off ended when the mountain lion simply turned and walked away – defeated by a man who knew what never to do in its presence.

And so it needs to be with us as well, says James. We need to *resist* the devil; to keep our eyes on him at all times; to never turn our back or let down our guard. You see, James was writing to a church that was in conflict – even way back then. And what he urged was a spirit of gentleness; a gentleness born of the wisdom we receive from God; a gentleness that then guides and informs our faith and all of our relationships.

Because when something is going wrong within our churches, he says, it’s because of the cravings and unresolved issues in our lives. And so, at our very core, at the very core of our churches and congregations, there needs to be this gentleness and mercy, and this genuine desire for peace.

And so we have to be on guard, both for the selfish ambitions and desires *within us*, as well as the evil temptations that *surround us*. But, most of all, we just need to be gentle with each other, as God in Christ has been gentle with us. Amen.

