

The Need for Wisdom (James 3:13-18)

I once came across a cartoon that pictured a person who had struggled to reach the mountain perch of a wise man who had a long white beard and was sitting cross-legged at the mouth of his cave. Having reached the destination, the person asked the recluse: Wise man, tell me, what is the answer to life? To which the hermit replied, “How should I know? I’ve been up here by myself for 50 years.” Which hints at the idea that true wisdom for life is acquired over time while engaged in life. And it also points out that some of the sources we seek for wisdom will disappoint us.

It seems to me that the present circumstances of our world could use a dose of wisdom for despite the remarkable progress made on so many fronts, we’re in a world of hurt. Think tanks, pundits, and learned societies are talking about our reaching inflection points, where the weight of a particular issue is bearing down to the place of causing momentous change. Some conclude that we’re beyond the point of reversing change and are now in the place of coping with it. Sadly, no matter the topic, the problem is self-inflicted. Warnings have been ignored or dismissed in the interest of short-term gain, or short-sighted self-interest. Concurrent with this is a rise in collective anger and fear, both of which are prime dynamics for manipulation which has, in this country, resulted in increasing polarization and tribalism fracturing relationship and community. Simmering discontent has led to flash points of violence in homes, neighborhoods, schools, roadways, stores, and businesses. And, I’m sorry to say, churches haven’t been exempted from this. Though physical violence is not typical, discontent and anger has led to departures from fellowship, and for some, from faith altogether.

Reflecting on this led me to the book of James, for it profiles wisdom, as the means for life’s approach. It’s opening is rather startling: Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds...what is going on here? Did I read that correctly? Shouldn’t it say, consider it pure joy when your trials of many kinds are behind you? We all tend to breathe a sigh of relief when troubles end. But that’s not what James wrote. At least he didn’t write, “welcome trials of many kinds” and he didn’t say, just grit your teeth and hang on during trials. He did say, consider it pure joy, which points to a strategy or outlook, but he qualified it with the dynamic of joy. But he didn’t necessarily mean “be happy” amid trials. When NT writers use the term joy, they mean joy in the sense of being kept, cared for, knowing that God has our back. So when James frames our approach to trials of many kinds with joy, he meant for us to grasp that we remain in God’s care, God’s grip, if you will, as we encounter these, and that these moments develop perseverance in our faith; we prevail as we experience God’s leading through our trials, we grow up in faith and become complete—we discover or acquire resources that fill in our gaps ever equipping us for whatever lies ahead.

I’d say that we’re in a time when we are facing trials of many kinds. We’re not all facing the same ones personally, but some we do experience collectively, and the Spirit of Christ, through the writing of James, is prompting us to consider this joy, for though Christ doesn’t send these trials, they become an occasion for growth if we recognize them as such. Which is why James immediately follows this up with an exhortation towards wisdom—that is, “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” In other words, if you can’t make heads or tails of what’s going on and you’ve no idea how to move through it, ask God for wisdom, which is insight and skill in living, and God will provide exactly what you need, in this case wisdom, to guide your life.

The Bible places a high premium on wisdom. Scholars recognize this and have catalogued certain books in the Hebrew Scriptures under the heading of wisdom literature, the one we’re most familiar with is Proverbs which frequently references the value of wisdom, encourages its readers to acquire it and devotes an entire chapter to defining its meaning and presence as a characteristic of God. King Solomon is heavily profiled in the historical books for the fact that he desired wisdom above all else for the purpose of ruling God’s people in a manner reflecting God’s desires for them. Many believe that Solomon is the principal author, among others, of Proverbs. Some also hold that he’s also responsible for the book of Ecclesiastes, a component of the wisdom literature, although it features a rather cynical tone

when it comes to life's contingencies. Nevertheless, wisdom is highly valued throughout the biblical record when its source originates with God.

Given this high value, contemplatives and mystics in Church history and thought consider Jesus more a wisdom teacher than a law-giver. Our Western minds lean towards the law-giver frame of reference—we're more inclined to reason and rational thought, we like to think in clearly defined categories of right and wrong, good and evil, reward and punishment. This results in a perspective for faith that is more performance based and individualistic, and we tend to miss the focus on wisdom that has an Eastern flavor which pays more attention to human development, to communitarian welfare and influence, to wholeness, to living in the present moment of God's favor and presence in everyday life. This is much of what Jesus conveyed in his conception and teaching about the kingdom of God. Western approaches to faith are projected against the backdrop of judgement to come; an Eastern perspective favors relationship and blessing as the experience of already living in God's life in a continuity that never ceases.

James, then, the brother of Jesus, in his writing promotes discernment over judgement, that is, learning to live in the rhythm of God's life as it plays out in the dimensions of daily life, in the rough and tumble of personal relationships, in the dynamics of community life, and in the demonstration of God's life expressed through ours. Behind his thought, though not as overt as in other NT books, is the sense that by so living, we experience the fullness of life intended by God which is in sharp relief to the world's approach to life, but that contrast provides an alternative vision for life that would compel the world's attention and draw them to what God offers through Jesus Christ.

To that end James defined the idea of wisdom—godly wisdom—that supports this approach to life. In the text Kim read for us moments ago, James essentially said, “this is what godly wisdom looks like”—it's seen in a good life—a benevolent life—by deeds, or actions, done in humility—a true grasp of one's standing and ability—meaning that life so lived isn't the result of our having figured it out so much as it is living in agreement with God's desires and by the ability God gives us to live it. This, by the way, is in full agreement with the way Paul framed it in Ephesians 2 where he contrasted our lives against the way we used to live before Christ by saying, “...it is by grace you have been saved—rescued—through faith—confidence in God's direction—and this not from yourselves—grace—it is the gift of God, not by works—a merit-based approach—so that no one may boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.” A perfect correspondence with “a good life [expressed] by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

Like Paul, James warned against what we might call “Conventional wisdom,” an inherited approach to life, what we might adopt or continue as the result of what we see happening around us practiced by a culture or system that doesn't share our conviction of Jesus as the source of true life. In truth, we all acquire a sense of wisdom, the way to live life, but we're compelled to assess the source of it. We're not to uncritically accept what passes for wisdom in our world as simply “the way it is in the real world.”

Friends, Jesus calls us to follow him in in the real world, the one that came from his hand, the one he sustains, the one for which he died, and the one that is enfolded in his life. And the truth of it is, that following Jesus will put us at odds with conventional wisdom. We can expect a clash of culture, for Jesus is the very definition of countercultural. But this provides us a clear basis for assessment in determining the wisdom by which we're living. Are we caught up in conflict, fostering aggression, exerting might in the hope of conquest? That's a pattern with which we're all too familiar—it is the way of the world apart from God. But if that's showing up in our approach to life, what might that say about our center? If our lives are focused on self-interest and self-preservation—the protection, at any cost, of what we deem necessary for security and success, what does that say about our sense of joy?

James defines the currency of godly wisdom as peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. It's another way of saying love in action. These are all other-based dynamics that we are able to exemplify because of our conviction

that we are living in God's care. When we live life from this perspective, we become peacemakers, meaning not just the absence or suppression of conflict, but efforts towards ensuring the welfare of others, working towards the ideal that all have access to the means of living life under the blessing and welfare of God. Now that doesn't mean that all will immediately share our convictions about Jesus as Sovereign over all of creation, but they are still entitled to his blessing, which largely comes through us—his life alive in us.

James points to an outcome, that peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness, and I suspect that the agricultural reference is intentional. Planted seeds take time to cultivate and produce a harvest. You don't plant corn one day and harvest a crop the day after. The anticipated outcome takes time, but it's worth the wait.

This passage calls us to assess the wisdom by which we're living. What's the currency of our wisdom? What is it producing? It's really asking: What kind of a world will we live in? The world in which we're living needs wisdom—what are we offering to that end? The outcome for which we hope will develop as we live from the wisdom God provides. It's a long-term process—it's a one-by-one kind of influence, but that influence will grow as we pursue and practice the wisdom that God generously provides to all who ask. AMEN