

“Wisdom Worth Knowing”
B Pentecost 17, James 3 & 4
September 19, 2021; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

Two Kinds of Wisdom

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for^{al} those who make peace.

Friendship with the World

⁴ Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet^{bl} something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, “God^{cl} yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? ⁶ But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says,

“God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble.”

⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Live Well, Live Wisely (THE MESSAGE)

¹³⁻¹⁶ Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here’s what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It’s the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn’t wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn’t wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn’t wisdom. It’s the furthest thing from wisdom—it’s animal cunning, devilish plotting. Whenever you’re trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others’ throats.

¹⁷⁻¹⁸ Real wisdom, God’s wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results *only* if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.

“Following Christ, being God’s friend, is not simply a matter of getting work done and being a busy bee for the Lord. Rather, following Christ holistically is a matter of with what posture and from what core your works emerge.

“Listen to James and draw near to God. God will draw near to you. Resist the Devil of Selfish Ambition, Envy, and Covetousness. When our actions, including preaching, are born from God’s wisdom, our inner and outer worlds become a friendlier, holier, more peaceable place. When we lift from our core, we find that we have the collective strength to lift what once seemed an impossibly heavy burden to bear. (Casey Thornburgh Sigmon)

I. TWO KINDS OF WISDOM

A. The World’s Wisdom

What is this “wisdom of the world?” Is it what we learned in youth group—“don’t get into cars with boys?” Avoid the “worldly wiles” and keep yourself pure, set apart, not like “those people?” What do you think of when you hear, “The wisdom of the world?”

Bruce Epperly: James asserts that the body of Christ is a home for everyone. **The way of the world**, James believes, is to prefer the wealthy, well-dressed, and well-behaved, but in God's realm, the vulnerable and poor—the beggar in tattered garments—is created in God's image and needs to be treated with affirmation and respect.

James recognizes that it is easy to become a friend of the world. For James, the **"world"** is not the physical body or creation around us. The world is a **state of mind and way of treating others** in which we see and judge others by appearances, prefer power to love, and value possessions more than persons. In fact, for James, to live in the world is to misuse the bodies of others, neglecting their health and well-being and engaging in consumption to the detriment of our spiritual lives and the welfare of our planet.

Conversation: What are the messages and values you hear and see coming down to us through TV, radio, media, internet?

"Pause a moment to recall the commercials you've seen on television or turn on your set for an hour to heighten your awareness of our culture's values. Comfort, sex, special status, beating the other guys, having things others don't have, having the latest and best, looking good, and making impressions on others—that's what's celebrated.

"You don't see many commercials about the way of Christ—reaching out to a homeless person, forgoing a new adult toy to care for a sick child, spending more time with family than on the job, turning down a promotion to focus on parenting, and living simply so others may simply live. The emphasis of the news and media programming is also a barometer of our cultural and economic priorities: reality shows celebrate wealth and power, emphasize conflict and infidelity, and see competition as more definitive of human life than compassion or cooperation.

B. Holy & Holistic Wisdom

What is "Christ's Wisdom," then, in contrast to the World's Wisdom? What values and messages and examples do you also hear and see around you, that exude a different spirit?

James reminds us that what is important is usually right in front of you—your partner in life, a small child, a teenager seeking direction, time spent in prayer and meditation, outreach to the lost, and knowing we are all in this together.

James sees God's presence embodied everywhere and this is the basis for Christian ethics and justice-seeking. **God has skin** and the most important skin is to be found among the vulnerable, whose spirits are crushed and bodies abused on a daily basis. (Epperly)

II. WHAT VOICE ARE YOU LISTENING TO?

What voice are you listening to? Which Inner Voice? The Inner Critic, bringing curses rather than blessings, constantly chiding you out of a place of insecurity and scarcity? Or the Inner Voice of Wisdom—Christ's heart and voice within you, talking to you as Beloved? Speaking out of abundance, not scarcity; reminding you that you are enough, just as you are, and you are doing enough.

"The wise Walt Whitman once said: *'Be curious, not judgmental.'*"

Curiosity is a wise posture born of a willingness to yield. Judgment is not. It leads to defensiveness and may cause us to miss out on an invitation from God to try something new.

What if we listened to that Inner Voice speaking to us—not just reassuring and comforting when we are running around like a chicken—thinking we need to always be doing more—whether for God or humankind or the earth.

What if we trusted our instincts, our gut-feelings, our intuition on a regular basis, rather than dismissing our own inner Wisdom that comes from our Creator?

Story of texting Paul Dorfmeister. Listened to my inner nudging from the Spirit and sent him a text asking how he was doing, so I could update at the Bazaar. He was literally pulling into the driveway in BV when he got my text! “Rebecca! I just pulled in! I’ll see you tomorrow at the Bazaar.”

Movie: *Tammy Faye* – Bakers started out grounded in their faith and a passion for sharing the unconditional love of God with every person—especially those who had been told they were not loved or worthy, and that God was first and foremost a judgmental Deity, condemning all wrongdoers of any kind to hell.

They were in love with each other and in love with God, and on fire to entertain and inspire anyone who would watch their television program on the PTL—Praise the Lord Network they created.

They were passionate about building, too. Homes for unwed mothers, homes for the homeless, buildings for vital mission projects to live out the love of God in practical action. And as they built their dynasty, funded by “partners,” as they called their supporters and TV viewers, they also felt called to build mansions for themselves and their family members and friends. To build an extravagant lifestyle, enjoying the extravagant generosity of God and their followers.

That led to more and more excess, including the excess of the “messages from God” that kept coming to them:

“God told me to do this!” Jim Baker said on many occasions. To build a Christian amusement park, to build a bigger castle, to trust God to bless all my endeavors, no matter the cost.

“Inner Wisdom” can obviously get confused. If “discerning the spirits” and “looking for the fruits” does not go hand-in-hand with the visions and messages.

Two kinds of wisdom. Two differing paths, as outlined by James—we see those two paths walked down and played out by many people and organizations. All around us. Every day.

III. WISDOM LOOKS LIKE

Conversation with Helen—Enough for Outreach Team to focus on the Backpack Program, keeping it funded and encouraging wider community involvement.

Bazaar – Simpler, Gentler, More enjoyable

At the end of the day, we weren’t all exhausted and potentially cranky with each other! Our feet didn’t hurt as bad, we still had some energy to celebrate some important birthdays, and joy and laughter and fellowship were shared around the table and heard around the church and community.

*Heeding the many articles and messages circulating around us about all churches being in a pivotal moment of decision and launching into the future.

“They’re not coming back!” cry out the “church gurus” telling us COVID and generational changes from the past decades far beyond our control have changed the landscape for every Church worldwide.

Rather than lamenting what has been lost and what will never be again, we are called to look forward with joy and hope in the God who calls us to Be the Church in new, connecting world-changing ways—right here and now!

That's wisdom. To have the courage—the heart—to listen with Holy Ears to where the Holy One is leading us. Whether right now, today, as we engage our spiritual lives together more profoundly, and next week, season and year—as we make a conscious choice to discern the “wisdom of the world” vs. God's Wisdom and proclaim an alternative message to the selfish ambition, greed, envy and covetousness that swirls around us.

Wisdom is when we, as we are all in this together, proclaim loudly: ¹⁷⁻¹⁸ Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results *only* if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor. (The Message)

IV. MAKE EVERYTHING A PRAYER – HOMEWORK

“Make Everything a Prayer”
A Holistic Spiritual Practice on
James 4:13-16, Philippians 4:4-7

Take a few minutes to read Philippians 4:4-7 along with James 4:13-16. Paul and James both see prayer as life-transforming and essential to healthy communities. In this exercise, let every encounter call you to prayer.

This is not intended to be some sort of sanctimonious, holier than thou behavior, but an awareness of your joys and pain, and the joys and pain of others. There is no one way to pray: you can simply say “thanks,” or “wow,” or “help,” or “joy,” or “yes, Jesus.”

Experiment with making prayer as regular as breath, seeing whole life as an offering to God. Ask God, where you may be someone's answer to prayer. Invite God to place people in your life for you bless and share in God's healing touch. Pray for their healing and the healing of the world.

Then, sit back and see what happens. Open to God's wisdom and inspiration in every situation, whether your prayers are embodied in acts of kindness or protest, advocacy or companionship, contemplation or action. (Bruce Epperly)

V. CLOSING PRAYER

“Wisdom Worth Knowing”

We “know” things in our hearts and souls—not just in our heads. Inner wisdom, gut feelings, insights, intuition.

Prayer to Close:

Are you longing for more wisdom in your life?
Do you face conflicts that need answers,
tough situations that require special insight?
Do you need more peace in your life?
Do you long to bear good fruit in your life?
Draw near to God, the giver of wisdom,
and God will draw near to you. Amen.