

James 3:13-18

Wise Wisdom

Mark 9:30-37

September 22, 2024

In the age of democracies citizens are always choosing leadership. It doesn't take much to see one of the downfalls of this form of government; always campaigning for the next election and the temptation not to govern, and hyperbolic rhetoric and the temptation to believe it, excessive emotionalism, the tendency towards hubris, partisanship, strife, division, even violence.

The same description of the world has always been true and was true in the Roman era in Judea. In the story of the gospels we see these realities contrasted to the way of Jesus, and we also see how even his own disciples, even while they were with him were vulnerable. For the second time since Peter's great declaration that Jesus is God's anointed, Jesus tries to convince them that things with him are not going to go as they expect,

“For the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”

It is hard to know what was going on in the minds of the disciples when they heard these words. The text says they did not understand him, and that seems obvious enough. But in what way did they misunderstand? Two developments arise.

In the first place, a dispute. They began to discuss amongst themselves which one of them was the greatest. It is clear from other texts (just a page or two away) that they were discussing which jobs they would each get when Jesus came into power.

They wanted to know who was going to be vice-president and chief of staff and communications director. Later, James and John asked him directly to allow one of them sit on his right and the other on his left in his glory (which happens after the third time he tries to tell them about their more accurate near future). Their plans stood in direct contradiction to the message Jesus was giving them.

The second development happens when Jesus confronts them about their conversation. He says, “if anyone wants to be the first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all. He takes a child as a visual aid and tells them, “whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, does not welcome me, but the one who sent me.” In another place he offered a child as an illustration in a similar way, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Neither the direct teaching of Jesus nor the visual aid seems to have had much affect. That is not surprising given human nature. Nowadays we even call our leaders, “public servants.” Some embody this spirit better than others.

It is, if not more common, at least tempting for people in leadership to see themselves in the opposite way, that if anyone desires to be first, they must be first and no one really uses children as visual demonstrations of ideal spirituality and of servanthood in the way that Jesus did.

Even when it is not an election year in our country, it is hard to read these texts and not apply them to the question of leadership, whether in the local church or community, or in the sense of denominational leadership or national political leadership. It can apply to anything; family life, coaching, teaching, running a business.

So for a few minutes this morning, let us make the attempt at least to see, that Jesus is offering life principles that can be applied across the board, even to the way we conduct ourselves in interpersonal relationships as well as in the larger community.

In that vein, let us consider also, the very important reading from the letter of James. James is known as a piece of what is called Wisdom Literature, the only one of its kind in the New Testament. Here, the author, traditionally reputed to be the brother of Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary, is straightforward and somewhat blunt.

He begins by saying what wisdom is not. It is not bitter, it does not involve envy, or selfishness. Such wisdom, the bitter, envious, selfish kind, is not heavenly but earthly, unspiritual. He remarks further

that wherever one finds envy and selfishness, there will also be disorder and evil practices.

The only way for us to take this warning is to see ourselves in it, to take the warning unto ourselves. For if we only see this danger in others, we miss the point entirely. Anyone can see, that whether in our political and cultural discourse, or any other areas of life, human beings often fail short of this high standard. We should be slow to judge others, recognizing that it is easier, as Jesus said, to see the speck in someone else's eye, than it is to see the log in one's own.

Then James goes on to speak of a true wisdom and that which characterizes it. It is a litany of goodness; it is, "pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit (good outcomes), impartial and sincere." He says it is practiced by peacemakers who sow in peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.

It is safe to say that there is enough bitterness and envy and selfishness to go around, and that the peace-loving purity, along with the rest, runs in short supply. At any rate, one can see the character traits that should be sought and nurtured, as well as those that should be avoided. How is this goodness to be sought?

On the one hand we believe in God's grace, and as we enter into the fall season and pass through the 507th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, we are not afraid to say, "Sola Gratia," "only grace," and to

acknowledge that every good thing comes from God as a gift, even our faith.

The presence of the church in the world and the faithfulness of ordinary people is the result of God's mercy and grace, given to us through Jesus, who is the Christ, by his crucifixion and resurrection.

On the other hand, we all know that we are called to faith that acts, faith that, though it is also God's gift, works hard. We work hard at the nurture of faith and grace in our lives, we offer ourselves voluntarily, patiently learning and growing as God works in us, as Paul writes, "to will and to work for his good purpose."

Sometimes our experience makes it seem like we are doing all the work, and at other times it seems we are wholly caught up in grace in a way that leaves us unable to take any of the credit for anything, but to assign it all to grace. We live, pray, and act . . . under the umbrella of grace.

Wise wisdom begins in understanding Jesus when he tells us that his kingdom, as an earthly kingdom, is going to fail, and that he is going to be executed as a criminal by the authorities. It continues when we humbly accept ourselves as disciples just like the twelve, who consistently failed to understand and listen to what Jesus was saying.

We live in the world, we buy and sell and work and play, we are forced to live by the world's standards of success and failure, the world's understanding of what

constitutes a meaningful life, and sometimes we make decisions that are totally related to that life, but it is not the most important thing. For we also listen to the divine Word, which tells us that the world's standards are not permanent, they are not heavenly, and the relationship between what is on earth, which is passing away, and what is in heaven is not direct.

Called to live according to eternal values, we learn to balance the daily concerns of life in this world, of success and failure, of citizenship, with the example of Jesus who taught humility, service and sacrifice, mercy and forgiveness, and that the single event in history that in the end is the only one that matters is when the Roman government in Judea crucified Jesus, which is God's redemption, which matters for each of us in our personal lives, and matters for our world which is passing away, and for all eternity.

Let this be our primary concern. This is wise wisdom.

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