

August 20, 2017

Sermon: Two Wisdoms

Pastor Clay Oglesbee

Text: James 3:13-18,

I told my wife I was going to preach on Wisdom today. Of course, she asked me, *what is wisdom?* Well, that threw a monkey-wrench in the whole project! *What is wisdom?* We all want it; we all seek it; but who can define it? *What is it?* As someone has written, “Wisdom is one of those qualities difficult to define—because it encompasses so much—but which people generally recognize when they encounter it. And it is encountered most obviously in the realm of decision-making.”

Psychologists will tell us that wisdom involves the way we commingle our knowledge, our experience, and our deep understanding that somehow sets a certain course that makes allowance for the uncertainties of life, as well as its ups and downs.

One definition I read is that wisdom is “an awareness of *how things play out over time (that) confers a sense of balance.*” Wisdom is the patience and observational ability to see how things play out for good or bad, and to anticipate that, *in a deep way—in a moral way—in a soulful or spiritual way.*

Sometimes I wonder if our culture has given up on wisdom. We seem to prefer the shallows of life to the

deep ways, to get entertainment instead of insight, to go after just what works or succeeds, not just for what is just.

Who are the people you know or credit with this depth and heart--with integrity, humanity and reflective or Godly wisdom? How many can you count? Whenever I am part of a birthday gathering for an older person, I keep asking for their "speech," their story, their words of wise guidance. But most people blush, or joke self-consciously about this, and avoid saying what wisdom they have received in life and from God. *I wish that were not so.* If we have *any* responsibility at all to one another, it seems to me it ought to be to tell others what our reflections, prayers, studies and experience have shown us about life and faith.

At least there are the Scriptures. They still talk about wisdom, and particularly so in a book like *The Book of James*, which is said to be the wisdom book of the New Testament. It feels comforting and encouraging even to hear real wisdom *mentioned* there as a possibility for us:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show (this wisdom) by your good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom....The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere...(3:13 and selected)

Show how things play out over time—when we leave a life that is focused on God, Christ, and Holy Spirit!

The third chapter of *The Book of James* has a good deal to say, actually, about *two* kinds of wisdoms--the one from God, that is deeper and about how things play out over time for good *if we are seeking the good*, and the other form is what we would just call “worldliness” or self-interest. The wisdom from God involves our quiet and patient learning of integrity. Earthly wisdom or worldliness is, as James says, not “from above”; it does not have its source in God. Earthly wisdom tends to be blind to the most important things because this wisdom always has a complaint to file, a grievance to make, or an entitlement for others to pay. Worldly wisdom does not want to know so much what is good, true, and right, as what is legal, who should be blamed, and what will make me look good here?

We all know or have read of the worldly-wise, the self-serving, the narcissistic or controlling, or powerful. We all act like that sometimes. That really isn't what is most interesting about life. What fascinates me, more than the cons and selfish people I've met are the people of quiet wisdom and piety before the Mystery.

Several years ago, I had a friend who was dying of cancer. He was new to my town, but became widely known and well-respected very quickly for his humor, knowledge, kindness and leadership. Many among my

friends felt painful loss when they heard of his illness, and knew that his death would bring an almost indefinable loss to our community, the loss of a generous brother and citizen. I don't remember exactly how we came up with the idea, but we arranged with him and with his spouse, that on a given night, he would come to meet in a private home with about 15 or more of us, mostly younger men. We asked him if he would come to us to tell us the story of his life, and the story of his active dying process, and the story of what he had learned along the way.

Surprisingly, he agreed. And though he was weakened by his cancer and chemotherapy, he came to a friend's home, and a group of men surrounded him, and he talked quietly but steadily for almost two hours about living and dying—and about the wisdom he had gained along the way.

It was an amazing night. I had never before spent so much sacred time listening closely to one person attempt to sum up their experience of love, vocation, guidance from God and spiritual insight. His conversation with us was really about Godly wisdom, not just knowing *about* God; but *applying* that knowledge every day in kind, thoughtful and fruitful ways. It is not just knowing *about* grace; it is *doing* a grace-filled day, a grace-filled life. That night, I knew that my dying friend had brought us all to the heart of

Christian life and faith by his honest story. He was gone within a few days after that revelatory night.

World-wise outsiders, observing things religious, sometimes conclude that there is nothing to the religion business, or to the Christian person's life's journey, but mistakes, misbehavior, dishonesty or hypocrisy—just flimsy camouflage for one's own self-interest.

However, I think the folks *on the inside of God's grace*, who live and die seeking God's ways, see it differently. The man who told his story did not say, "I don't know what to say, or I haven't learned anything, or This is stupid!" He didn't say, all my life I've been surrounded by enemies, or that he was the greatest person who ever resided in our town. What he did was, *clinch his teeth* while he was sick and dying, and anticipating his own end, and while he suffered through the last of his days, what he said was not a single complaint, not a single name-calling, not a syllable of bad language. What he said, white-faced and thin, was, "I'm okay. I am still in love with God and neighbor, and let me tell you what the divine Mystery has shown me and guided me to do in life. I am just your brother, and I am traveling now where you must all travel, sooner or later." And then, having wrestled with his own angels of doubt, struggle, suffering, he told his limping story, gratefully and joyously, in pain but still as a full human-soul, and a forgiven and forgiving member of the community of faith and trust. *He showed us wisdom. True wisdom. He*

showed us how things play out over time—when the great Mystery of God is at the heart of your life.