

Heavenly Wisdom vs Worldly Wisdom James 3: 13- 4: 3, 7-10; Mark 9:30-37

A number of years ago a survey was done asking for responses to the simple, but very open-ended question, "What do you want?" Varied responses were received- one person said, "I want the kind of friendships I had in high school and college." Another responded, "I want to do a really good deed sometime- like save somebody's life." Another said they wanted "someone to believe in- someone to trust." Another replied, "I'd like to know what really happens when you die." And yet another said, simply, "I want my father alive again- for one day."

How would you respond to that question, "What do you want?" The answers to that simple question are a reflection of another question, "What do you value?" The scriptures today- Psalm 1 (Call to Worship), portions of James 3 & 4, as well as the Gospel lesson from Mark 9 all bear the constant theme of assessing where our values lie. We have a choice in our life: like coming to a fork in the road, we can go left or right. The one path leads to a dead end and the other path leads to life. We might say our Scripture passages this morning are road signs trying to point us in the right direction, to the right path that leads to life.

Psalm 1 talks about these two paths- the wrong one is wide and well trodden- by sinners. The other, narrow, is chosen by those who love God and wish to obey God's commandments. In other words, there are two ways we can live: as those who rebel against and challenge God or those who strive to follow the ways of God.

The Psalm begins with a blessing on those who "do not follow the advice of the wicked." These blessed ones have one source for their wisdom- God's wisdom. The Psalmist compares a life lived in commitment to God to a tree planted near a source of water where it lives and flourishes. On the other hand, the Psalmist identifies the "wicked" as having the exact opposite life experience- one of instability in all their ways- like the dry chaff, they are easily blown away wherever the wind blows.

In general terms, those who seek to live meaningful lives of generosity can expect to find a source of peace in life. That doesn't mean they will never fall or experience disappointment, but it does mean there are divine resources to provide strength in such times. On the other hand, those whose lives are marked by poor choices and bad habits often find themselves miserable and searching endlessly in various directions for which they cannot find peace.

For the past four weeks, the lectionary has led us to "down to earth" and practical wisdom in The Book of James. In today's scripture, James talks about wisdom in similar terms of the two paths referenced in Psalm 1. True Wisdom or False Wisdom; Heavenly Wisdom or Worldly Wisdom. According to James,

True Wisdom is stated as:

Gentleness
From above/God
Pure
Peaceable
Willing to Yield
Full of Mercy

False Wisdom is stated as:

Envy
Earthly, devilish
Unspiritual
Disorder
Selfish
Selfish Ambition

For James, true wisdom is seen most clearly in those who are at peace with God and through that, God brings peace and wholeness to their actions and relationships in the rest of their lives. True wisdom is the ability to use the knowledge and relationship with God in service of God and humanity, not merely to enrich oneself.

False or Worldly Wisdom does the opposite- it creates strife. It makes self the center of all things. The one who ends up with the most toys is the winner. Such wisdom can only lead to disorder, contention, disputes, and sometimes war. It often ends up with a world very much like we have now and have always had.

True wisdom is seen in a person who does not care who gets the credit for something good, as long as it gets done. True wisdom is personified in the life of Jesus who we read about in our Gospel lesson from Mark.

In last week's text from Mark, we heard Jesus talk with the disciples about who people thought he was and who the disciples thought he was. We found Jesus following that attempting to prepare the disciples about his upcoming suffering betrayal, death and rising after three days. In response, we find recorded that Peter took Jesus aside and proceeded to rebuke him for such talk about suffering. Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter for not being willing to see the bigger picture and includes a call to discipleship when he states, "If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me."

Our scripture this week from Mark, records Jesus a second time attempting to prepare his disciples for the coming days. Verse 32 states, "But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." All this talk of suffering and death was not at all what they had in mind for Jesus or for themselves. They envisioned a glorious government with them in the cabinet in positions of honor. Is it possible that they were so sure THEY knew who Jesus was that they could not even consider they might be wrong, or could not even imagine the horror Jesus was trying to tell them?

Verses 33 & 34 from Mark provide, in the disciple's behavior, the contrast we found in Psalm 1 and James 3 & 4- the contrast between heavenly wisdom and worldly wisdom. The disciples, on their way to Capernaum, walking no doubt at some distance behind Jesus, get into an argument about who among them will be the greatest, that is, who will have

the highest position of honor in the new government they anticipated. When they came to their destination, Jesus asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent. Jesus sat them down and said, "whoever wants to be first must be the last of all and servant of all." These words comprise some of the most familiar and widely documented of Jesus' words. Its message is so simple and well known and it can feel deceptive. Typically, being "first" means to hold rank ABOVE all others and being "last of all" is synonymous with being "servant of all!" With Jesus words, he turns greatness upside down, reverses the normal social order of stations- undercuts all self-ambition. According to Jesus, greatness is not achieved in ruling OVER others but in SERVING others. While serving others is thought to be the lowest of all positions, Jesus makes it the highest.

Jesus then uses an object lesson as another effort to penetrate the disciple's misconceptions. Jesus sits a little child among them. A little child, one of those who were given little value in Jesus' time...the lowest of the low...even lower than women. Let's hear Jesus' point- Jesus places what was considered a "nothingness" of a child in their midst and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Welcoming the child/servant is welcoming Christ, which in turn is welcoming God.

Jesus seems to be saying that rather than looking down on them because they do not seem powerful or worthy, but to the contrary, the little ones, the lowly ones, are the MOST worthy of all in Jesus eyes. A true disciple does not hesitate to serve anyone, even the lowliest. That is what being a servant means- serving without thought or reward.

A story is told of a busy hospital waiting room filled with anxious folks. A young child kept the adults entertained with all the energy of a child. Suddenly one of the people sitting in the room began to cry.....all the others shifted uneasily in their seats, not knowing how to respond. The entertaining young child, stopped her activity, observed the crying individual and without a word went over and put her arms around that person gently wiping away a tear as she did it. A wonderful example of Heavenly Wisdom from an awesome teacher- if only we have eyes to see.

Our Psalm 1 scripture speaks to the reality that we are given choices in our lives as to which "fork in the road" we wish to take. The one path is wide and well-trodden by sinners, the other is narrow and chosen by those who love and wish to follow God. The narrow road is a life like a tree planted near a source of water where it flourishes. The wide road is the opposite- is a life filled with instability and searching endlessly for peace.

The Book of James speaks to the two paths of wisdom- that of True or Heavenly Wisdom as compared with False or Worldly Wisdom. True/Heavenly Wisdom is: Gentleness, From above/God, Pure, Peaceable, Willing to Yield, Full of Mercy.

False or Worldly Wisdom is: Envy, Earthly, Devilish, Unspiritual, Disorder, Selfish, Selfish Ambition. As we review these lists found in our James Scripture, there is a feeling with Heavenly Wisdom of peace and wholeness which is reflected in daily lives. Worldly Wisdom is crudely shown with those actions that only produce disorderly conduct striving to be the best of all.

In Mark, Jesus responds to his disciples arguing over who was the greatest and who would have the highest position in the earthly kingdom they assumed Jesus came to establish. Jesus clearly states, "whoever wants to be first must be the last of all and servant of all." Jesus turns our human, earthly idea of greatness upside down. Greatness is not achieved in ruling OVER but in SERVING others.

Questions-

- *Psalm 1- Which path, individually or collectively, brings the most comfort when followed?
- *Book of James- Which wisdom brings peace and comfort? Which wisdom brings discord and a feeling of being unsettled?
- *Gospel of Mark- What areas of serving do we, individually or collectively undertake? Which areas should we more faithfully undertake?

Working on this message early last week, I found myself struggling for a conclusion. Laying it aside, to do more thinking about that, I opened my phone to the Facebook page. I found the following post from one of our nieces- she has given me permission to share: she wrote:

"A line to check in at my follow-up doctor's appointment was longer than normal today. As I looked past the shoulders of others, I notice an elderly woman trying to make it to a seat in the waiting room after she checked in. I could hear the whispers of others in line about how they were going to be late now waiting for the woman.

I excused myself from THAT line and walked over to the woman. "Good morning, can I help you out." She looked up from a hunched position leaning over her walker, "I guess I'm getting slower these days, especially today." I put my hand on her back and smiled, as we both slowly walked to the chairs together.

I missed my appointment, not because she made me late, but because I was needed/or some one above needed me to meet this strong, delightful woman. I'm not looking for accolades, I'm just sharing this because I hope you don't stay stuck in lines with your own frustrations. But step away from THAT line and step up by lending a caring hand."

Heavenly Wisdom and Worldly Wisdom- wisdoms each of us is given the choice to experience and share. Which do you choose? Amen

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