

Wisdom from Above – Ben Wayman

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

One of my most memorable experiences in seminary was in a Christian ethics class. One day, our Professor begged students with children not to hover at the back of the classroom by the doors, for quick exit when their kids became disruptive. Instead, she insisted that these students sit up front in the middle of the auditorium, with their kids. This is what wisdom from above looks like.

If you don't agree, then you'd fit in well with the disciples. In fact, if there was ever a question in your mind, today's lesson from Mark should clear things up for you. We are the disciples. Even though we prefer Jesus' company, we don't really get him. And one reason why we don't get him is because he's just too different. Which, of course, is why we like his company.

Last week we read about Peter's famous confession at Caesarea Philippi. In his sermon, John Massena suggested that Peter really didn't understand Jesus and his confession shows it. I think John is right: "whatever Peter and the others meant by 'the Christ' was in contrast with the rejection, suffering, death, and raising that the son of man was 'bound' to experience" (John Massena). We know that Peter gets Jesus wrong because when Jesus next speaks about his upcoming suffering and death, Peter objects and then Jesus rebukes him for setting his mind on human things rather than divine things.

But can we blame Peter for this? It's not obvious to me how suffering and death are good things, much less divine things. But Jesus talks about self-denial, taking up crosses, and following him to death as though they were obviously divine ways of living. Jesus asks, "For what will it profit [you] to gain the whole world and forfeit [your] life?" So while Jesus talks about dying to the world in order to find life, the disciples and we would rather stick to our guns and keep on living in this world, thank you very much. We hear Jesus perfectly clear: by dying we save our life and by gaining the world we lose our life. But do we really believe this kind of talk? So, again, this is one reason why we just don't get Jesus – his thinking is just so different from our own.

The difference between Jesus and us plays out quite a bit in our lesson today from Mark. Since Peter's declaration last week, Jesus has been transfigured on the mountain, he has met with Moses and Elijah, and he has done what his disciples could not do, when he casts a demon out of a boy. Today, Jesus returns to the topic of his suffering and death, and then, in response to the disciples' arguing about who was the greatest, he sets a child in the middle of them and tells them their thinking about greatness is all wrong. And not only is it wrong, it's entirely upside

down. Children in the ancient worldview, were not only not great, but they were socially invisible; they had no value whatsoever in their culture. Jesus' thinking is *really different*. But Jesus' difference is not the only reason why we don't 'get' him. I think there is another, more fundamental reason why Jesus is hard for us to understand. Simply put: We don't want what Jesus wants. Which is another way of saying our desires are not divine. James helps us see that this is actually a much bigger problem than we might at first think.

James' letter to the Christians of his time might just as well have been written to us here at St Paul's. Our reading today helps us understand our lesson from Mark and our own basic problem of not wanting what Jesus wants. James is clear: the issue here is one of wisdom. We can either live our lives according to the wisdom of this world, which is earthly, unspiritual and demonic. Or, we can live according to the wisdom from above, which is gentle, full of mercy, and peaceable.

James teaches us that we can figure out which kind of wisdom we prefer by looking at our lives. If we are envious or have selfish ambition, we are working out of worldly wisdom. What's interesting about envy and selfish ambition is that we in the church have become pretty tolerant with both envy and ambition. We make room for these traits in our community because it's not immediately clear to us how being envious or ambitious is a bad thing. But this morning, James clears all this up for us.

James helps us see that envy is the stuff of worldly wisdom because envy drives competition in this dog-eat-dog world. Envy names our desire for things, or skills, or positions, or accolades that others enjoy, but that we want for ourselves instead. The bitterness of envy is when we desire these things in such a way that we resent the things, skills, positions or accolades enjoyed by others who are often people in our own community. Envy destroys community because it makes us incapable of celebrating with those around us. And when we can't celebrate the good of our friends, they become our enemies.

James also helps us see that selfish ambition is the stuff of worldly wisdom because such ambition drives us to achieve for ourselves at the expense of others. Selfish ambition also names our desire for things, skills, positions and accolades, but it does so with a mind entirely to our self. Selfish ambition destroys community because not only are its successes sought without consideration of the community, but its successes are measured strictly in individual terms.

Together, envy and selfish ambition are a deadly combination. The two will not only destroy personal relationships, but entire communities. James puts it this way: "where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind" (Jas 3:16). We get a sense for what James means by disorder and wickedness just a few verses later when he talks about the disputes and conflicts in his Christian community. Disputes and conflicts, I'm sure, that were not unlike the argument between the disciples about who was the greatest. And

James is clear – whenever we have disputes and conflicts of this sort, these kinds of fights prove to us that we are operating out of worldly wisdom.

The thing about worldly wisdom is that it seems to make so much sense. In fact, one way to describe worldly wisdom is just that: common sense. Common sense teaches us that if we're not selfishly ambitious, we won't pass our class, or be able to buy a car, or land a job. Worldly wisdom is downright practical and it seems like the recipe not only for success, but simply for survival.

But both James and Jesus tell us that this worldly wisdom only leads to death. In fact, James says it leads to murder. When we operate on the wisdom of this world, we leave behind us a trail of the people and relationships we have killed because of our envy and selfish ambition.

Our reading from James today skips verse four – but it really needs to be read because it is here that James can be seen as the prophet that he is. He shouts: “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.” I've always been a bit confused by the numerous times that scripture tells us not to be friends with the world. This counsel seems to contradict the command to love our enemies. But our lessons this morning help us make an important distinction:

friendship is all about shared desire. And the decision before us is whether to share Jesus' desires, or the desires of the world. James makes this distinction clear when he tells us to be friends with God, not the world.

What James helps us see is that much of the time, we St Paulers may be in Jesus' company, but we are not Jesus' friends. We have bought into the lie that we can be both friends with the world and with Jesus. But James tells us that this is impossible. We cannot continue to be envious and ambitious for things, or positions, or accolades and still be friends with God. Friendship with God and friendship with the world are two fundamentally conflicting friendships because they are rooted in two fundamentally different desires. The one desires a life of self-denial and service to others, whereas the other desires a life of self-accomplishment and recognition from others.

Henri Nouwen's life clearly demonstrated his friendship with God and wisdom from above. Nouwen was a Catholic priest who was a professor at Notre Dame, then at Yale and finally, at Harvard. Sharing his life-story, The Henri Nouwen Society writes,

“Despite Nouwen's popularity at Harvard, he was not happy there. He found it a very ambitious, competitive environment and yearned for community. [Nouwen] wrote: ‘After twenty-five years of priesthood, I found myself praying poorly, living somewhat isolated from other people, and very much preoccupied with burning issues ... I woke up one day with the realization that I was living in a very dark place and that the term “burnout” was a convenient psychological translation for a spiritual death.’”

Nouwen left his post at Harvard and went to live among mentally challenged people until his death twelve years later. One way to interpret Nouwen's drastic change of life is that he repented for living according to the wisdom of the world.

It is a moral failing on my part that I think Jesus is so interesting. The fact that I think Jesus is 'interesting' indicates that there's a good distance between the life Jesus lived and the one I am living. I don't want to suffer. I don't want to die, and I am not inclined to make children the center of my attention when I have work to do. I think of myself more than I think of others and I am proud of my accomplishments. Too often I live my life according to the wisdom of this world.

The good news for you and for me this morning is that God wants to give us his wisdom. God in Christ has shown us that if we live for ourselves we forfeit the abundant life God intends for us. And this life operates on a wisdom that is not only different from this world, but altogether unimaginable. Wisdom from above recognizes that honoring children is at the heart of Christian ethics. And this morning's lesson from James paints us a picture of the kind of life God makes possible.

James describes lives that are gentle, pure, and peace-loving. Lives like these value people and friendships over ideas. He describes lives that are willing to yield. What a peculiar quality to point out: willing to yield. James here suggests that wisdom from above is not dead-set on getting its own way, proving its points, or steam-rolling other people. Rather, God makes it possible for us to put our desires and ideas aside to make room for someone else.

James continues to paint the picture of the Christian community God makes possible by stating that such communities are full of mercy and good fruits. With God's help, the church is a place where people experience God's forgiveness and extravagant abundance. Such a community will not value one person over another nor will it claim to be something it is not. Hypocrisy in the church is not about trying and falling short of God's wisdom but rather, claiming to operate out of God's wisdom when we are really acting out of our own self-interest.

But perhaps the staple of God's wisdom, which James is sure to repeat twice, is that it makes for peace. We are called to be a peaceful people who bring peace wherever we go. By being a people who repents of envy and selfish ambition, we become a people capable of celebrating and serving all people – living in love and peace with our neighbors.

Today James the prophet calls us to conversion. Our envy is a deep problem, and it's something for which we need to confess and stop doing. Our selfish ambition is a deep problem, and it's something for which we need to confess and stop doing.

And as we turn from the wisdom of the world to God's wisdom from above, we become single-minded in our devotion to God. Again, our lectionary reading stops short by a half verse. The full verse 8 reads: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."

This morning we are invited to repent and to be forgiven. We are called to quit our double-mindedness – our trying to live out two conflicting wisdoms. This morning we are invited to become true friends of God, who in his wisdom would rather be killed by the world than save himself.