

September 19, 2021-09-16

The most pervasive theme in three of our scriptures today is a pretty negative one. In the Old Testament selections from Jeremiah and the Psalms, and in the Gospel of Mark, we hear about *betrayal and suffering and death*. You probably noticed this as they were being read. Now *betrayal and suffering and death* do indeed play an important part in the Christian story, but forgive me please, I just don't feel like dwelling on them this morning. I guess I have bad news fatigue—the world is so full of negativity at the moment. I'm ready for some good news, and I think we actually find more of that in the remaining lesson, the one from the Epistle of James. The Letter of James is quite interesting in its own light, and is also easier to apply to daily life. So, let's check in with the letter of James, and save betrayal and suffering and death for another time.

First off, which James is it to whom the letter is attributed? There are lots of Jameses in the New Testament, nine by one count. Was it written by our James, the one for whom St James parish is named? No, actually: our parish is named for James the apostle, brother of John the apostle, the two sons of Zebedee. They were fisherman who traded in their nets to follow Jesus. But today's epistle is attributed to James, the brother of Jesus himself-- which is kind of remarkable when you think about it. James "the brother of the Lord" was a leading figure in the first days of the church, those early times when Jerusalem was still the center of the Jesus movement. His nickname was *James the Just*, and you can kind of see why when you read this letter. The letter of James is concerned with really getting things right, and actually doing good things for God. That's one reason it is worth studying. I think we also want to get things right. You and I want to do good things for God. How to do that is the question.

So... on to today's passage. It presents a repeated basic contrast: it contrasts wisdom that is of heaven, with the wisdom that is of earth. Let's hear first about the heavenly wisdom.

James says, "The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits." That's a very heart-warming list: let me repeat it:

"The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits."

I don't know about you, but I find that just hearing these words is somehow soothing, and encouraging. These words give hope, all by themselves, just by us listening to them and taking them in. As you hear them spoken out loud you kind of want to sigh and say, "Thank heavens, finally, some positive and heart-warming possibilities for humanity." Pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits." What lovely words. As they say these days: awesome! This wisdom, my friends, is the kind to have-- especially if we want to be faithful to our Lord and Savior, and do good things for God. As the letter puts it, "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom."

Now I have a reason for emphasizing how helpful it is just to listen and soak up these lovely words. The reason is that I think the best way to acquire heavenly wisdom is —so to speak—by soaking in it. It is more by osmosis that we gain heavenly wisdom, than by exertion. We tend to want to earn all the good things of life by working really hard. We expect that the way to make progress is kind of like going to the gym, and doing lots of sit-ups and building up our muscles. That's the American way especially.

But if you think about it, there are many processes that go best not by strenuous exertion, but by taking our time and letting things sink in slowly. That's how plants grow, for instance. They soak up the sun and the water, and slowly put out shoots and leaves and fruits and flowers. Then there are babies. They squirm around a lot to be sure, but that isn't what makes them bigger and plumper. That occurs because of mother's milk and many naps.

I would contend that the heavenly wisdom comes to us more like a plant growing in the sun, or a baby sleeping in its mother's arms, than like going to the gym and doing lots of reps. Heavenly wisdom emerges slowly, gradually, on its own timetable.

If that is so, then one implication is that patience is called for. Patience with ourselves above all. A plant doesn't bear fruit in one day. Neither will we start to live by the gentle wisdom from above, all in one go. It's going to take some time.

Still, there are ways we have to help; things we can do which can contribute. James alludes of to one of them. We can ask for help, he says. Ask God that is. It's surprising, really, how reluctant we are to do that. Or maybe we just don't realize that asking God could move things along.

Let's listen then to what James says himself: "You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures."

We do not have because we do not ask. Memorable words! James is talking about prayer here. It's pretty basic. Maybe he remembered his brother Jesus saying things like, "Ask and you shall receive." "Knock and the door shall be opened." "Seek and you will find."

If we ask God for the wisdom from on high, do we really think God won't answer? We do have to ask rightly, not just to amuse ourselves. But we have it on the best possible authority that if we really want to be wise, God will meet us half way. Maye all the way.

Prayer then is an example of the kind of thing I was talking about earlier, that soaking sort of experience that I said plants and babies have. Prayer is a way of soaking ourselves in the presence of God. We certainly do that here on Sunday mornings, but there is no need to stop there. How many hours of sunlight do plants need each week, in order to flourish? Will one

hour one day a week be enough? And babies? Can they get by on just one nosh once week? Of course not. In the same way, acquisition of heavenly wisdom takes repeated soakings in God.

Fortunately, there are other things that we can do besides just go to church Sunday morning. Right here at St James church we can discuss the scriptures together every Wednesday morning, and then meet for contemplative prayer two Wednesday evenings each month. There are also adult ed opportunities twice a month on Sunday afternoons.

But that is far from everything. Many people have patterns of private daily prayer. These patterns can be quite simple. Just saying the Lord's Prayer with attention and devotion once a day can have a great impact. Our prayer book has many other resources too.

My point is that if we decide to soak ourselves in the presence of God, why, there are infinite possibilities. I don't see how a person could make use of such opportunities faithfully, and not grow in purity, peace, gentleness, mercy, and good fruits. Heaven knows we need lots and lots of folk with this kind of wisdom. Let's ask for it.

I mentioned that James' letter makes a contrast between earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom. I have only talked about the heavenly wisdom. Well, that's OK. You are welcome to study on your own what James says about the other kind, the earthly kind. Be my guest. You will probably recognize yourself in what he says; I certainly do. But I'm not in the mood for belaboring how our cravings lead us astray. That's yesterday's news. Today's news is that there is a better way, and that Christ's gift to us is that we can find it, and really get somewhere in life.

Let me leave us with one final image. Our gospel from Mark ends with a little vignette of Jesus taking up a small child into his arms.

*Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

There is a lot to say about this passage, but in light of the approach so far let me just note that that was one lucky little child, the one Jesus picked up, I mean. Can you imagine being picked up and embraced by the incarnate Word of God, life itself? What effect did that experience have for that little child, long-term, over the course of a lifetime? Not many people have had such an experience. Or- have they? Isn't it true that in some way God takes all of us up into the divine embrace, and holds us in love? Of course it's true. It's happening right now.