

September 20, 2009

James 3:13-18, 4:7-8a  
Mark 9:30-37

“Wise guys and Smart cookies”

We’re going to start our reflection together with a simple exercise. I want you to listen and focus and let your mind’s eye work. Are you ready?

Quickly, without thinking too much, call up a mental picture of someone who is the embodiment of the word “smart”. Now, allow your mind to form a picture of a person who embodies the word “wisdom”.

I’m willing to bet the two images that came to your mind were different, weren’t they? What did you imagine, when you thought about the smart person? Did you see someone wearing large glasses, wearing a traditional business suit? Did you picture the classic “geek”—a skinny man in a white shirt with a pocket protector for his ink pens? Did you picture a guy who embodies the word “success”—with a wallet full of money, a powerful job, a nice car, sharp clothes? Most of us probably did picture a man, rather than a woman.

What came to mind when you considered the word “wisdom”? The smart and savvy guy may have disappeared, as another face came into focus. Maybe an older lined and creased face surrounded by white hair—a face and eyes that communicate compassion, perhaps even love. This person may have been clearly a man or a woman, but perhaps it wasn’t even clear. There may have been a rumpled and weary quality present also—but accompanied by a sense of peace—peace with oneself, others, with everything.

Our culture has a direct influence on these images. Being “smart” is highly valued in our culture—being smart in ways that provide power and status. Being “wise” isn’t such a big deal to us. It’s not immediately clear how being “wise” might benefit us. So, we push the “wisdom” thing onto people who have marginal status—the very old, the very young, the mythical “noble” poor, the powerless. We do not respect or honor our elders for the wisdom they possess. We think they are hopelessly clueless and out of date; they can’t manage a cell phone, they can’t even turn on the computer. We do not consider their lived experience, the wisdom about themselves, about life, about relationships, about people that they may have acquired.

Some years ago a 17 year-old high-school senior from Fremont, CA made national news when she achieved a perfect score (800) on both sections of the SAT, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, and a perfect 8,000 on the tough University of California acceptance index. At her high school she was known as “Wonder Woman” because of her brains. She headed off to an Ivy League school. But when she was asked by a reporter, “What is the meaning of life?” she was honest and answered, “I have no idea.”

There is a difference between wisdom and being smart. I remember teaching a Confirmation Class in the early years of my ministry. My son, Julien, was in the class, as was a youngster named Doug who had Down’s syndrome. In the fall, at one of our first classes, I asked the youth about how school was going for them. I asked Doug specifically, because I knew he had started attending a new school that year. I asked how it felt, was he making friends, were the kids pretty nice etc. Doug thought a moment, took a deep breath and said, “Oh, you know, it’s like everywhere. Some of the kids are really nice and others are kind of mean. It’s ok—I like my new school.”

Later, in a conversation with my son, I told him how impressed I was by Doug’s attitude and perceptions. I said, “You know, Doug has a lot of wisdom. He’s not smart, the way the world defines smart, but he has the kind of wisdom that matters.” I’ll never forget that conversation—God spoke to me directly through Doug, helping me learn an important truth.

Today’s readings deal with “wisdom”- how the world looks at wisdom and how TRUE Godly wisdom is found in relation to God.

Wisdom is a category of writing which is present in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. In ancient Israel wisdom was sought as a normal component of a faithful, God-fearing, adult life—along with a love of learning, heartfelt compassion, and devotion to God and his people,

The Book of Proverbs is one example of wisdom writings—it stresses realism. It’s filled with things like suggestions on how to run an effective household, how to work with others, how to get along in the world.

The Epistle of James echoes such themes and is similar in style to the Jewish wisdom tradition. James is convinced that there is a vast difference between human wisdom and “wisdom from above”. He focuses on everyday matters, offering his advice and warnings.

James teaches us that human-inspired wisdom, what the world says is clever or smart, is motivated by “envy and selfish ambition”—and the result of this “wisdom” is “disorder and wickedness of every kind”.

One of the clearest indicators of “wisdom from above” is “gentleness”- or what we might call “humility” or even “meekness”. Divinely inspired wisdom has no ulterior motives. It’s free of ambition or competition. Wisdom is not boastful about itself, but serves others humbly. God’s wisdom is recognized by its gentle and yielding spirit, its merciful nature, its peaceful, good and fair influence on events and outcomes.

James calls us to a different way than the world’s way. He calls us to follow Christ’s way. He calls us to outfit ourselves with peace, gentleness, a yielding spirit, goodness and mercy. He is offering an answer to the question, “How can we live as God wants us to live?”

Movies from the 1940’s are quite different from today’s films. Sometimes we expect them to be naïve, schmaltzy and hokey. But surprisingly, much of the dialogue is quick-paced and witty. Two phrases I’ve retained in my vocabulary from these films are “wise guys” and “smart cookies”. Sometimes these are negative terms- but sometimes they are lifted up as what we should be: smart, savvy, nobody’s fool, on top of things.

In today’s reading from Mark the disciples reveal themselves to be “wise guys”. They want to be in positions of power and high regard in the new “kingdom of God” that Jesus keeps talking about. Jesus knew what they were thinking. So- he took the best example he could find as the total opposite of a wise guy or smart cookie: a little child. I picture a tot no older than two. He said, “Here, this is the best thing to be. You want to know what’s smart- how to be the best--- the greatest?? Well, the smallest gets to be the best. Wisdom is being who you really are, and you are children to God. You are children OF God.”

Then Jesus said, substituting God’s wisdom for the world’s: “You need to relate to EVERYONE in this world, no matter how insignificant they might be according to WORLDLY WISDOM—you need to relate to EVERYONE as you would relate to ME, and to the ONE WHO SENT ME, the Ruler of the Universe.”

Wisdom is to put God first, to put God’s priorities first, and to turn away from selfish ambition and power seeking, from envy, from evil.

So what about that question that James appears to be answering? “How can we live as God wants us to live?” What about his answer—which is full of notions like “humility, gentleness, peace, mercy, willingness to yield”?

I do not expect that any of us live with those notions at the forefront of our everyday interactions. I do expect that we often see these notions as too high-minded, unrealistic, perhaps even **impossible** to put into practice in the real world.

How could this work? What would it look like? I have one example.

Jim Wallis is the founder of the Sojourners Community in Washington D.C., and an evangelical author and speaker. In his book, *Who Speaks for God?* He tells of being mugged right outside his home by four kids. They rushed him, slashed his face, and then yelled, “Keep him down! Get his wallet!”

*I popped up quickly, which seemed to surprise them. Seeing no weapons flashed, I squared to face my attackers. This was the first chance we had to really see each other face to face. I saw that my assailants were just children—three about 15, and one little one who couldn’t have been more than 13...The boys backed up a little when they saw I was bigger than they had expected. I’m a strong believer in non-violence, but have learned that being a weight lifter often helps in these potential conflict situations! The one who had hit me moved into a boxing stance while the others circled. The little guy began attempting some...karate kicks, which I assumed he had seen on television.*

*I decided to confront them, not intending to hurt them, but only to fend them off. Instinctively, I began to scold these lost young souls. I told them just to stop it, to stop terrorizing people, to stop such violent behavior in our neighborhood. Finally I shouted at them, “I’m a pastor!” And I told them if they wanted to try to beat up and rob a pastor, they should come ahead and take their best shot...I knew that invoking the authority of the church in the street is hardly a sure thing these days, when our churches often have such little involvement there.*

*Whatever it was that changed their minds, the youthful muggers turned and ran. “Get back here,” I shouted after them—then instantly realized wasn’t a good thing to say at that moment. But then something unusual happened.*

*The littlest kid, who couldn’t have been more than 4 ½ feet tall, turned back and looked at me as he ran away. With a sad face and voice the young karate kicker said, “Pastor, ask God for a blessing for me.”*

*He and his friends had just assaulted me. The little one had tried so hard to be one of the big tough guys. Yet he knew he needed a blessing. The young boy knew he was in trouble. I think they all did.*

Wisdom is putting God first in life--- even in this crazy, dangerous world. Wisdom is relating to everyone the way we would relate to Christ. Wisdom is to put God first, to put God’s priorities first, and to turn away from selfish ambition and power seeking, from envy, from evil. Wisdom is being humble and bowing before God. It’s not easy. But it will bless us. And it will change the world. AMEN.