

Wisdom James

3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9: 30-37, Psalm 54 9-24-06

There is an old Girl Scout song I vaguely remember that has these words as part of it: “Who gave the wise men their wisdom and to the poets their rhyme.” I know it was longer than this but as much as I Googled I could not find anything resembling it.

The answer to the question asked about wisdom was, “God.” This song was, evidently, sung in a day and age when God could make an appearance in campfire songs. I am not sure this can be done any more in our time of caution and political correctness.

The word “wisdom” makes several appearances in our Bible. It is a quality that was treasured and written about in the stories of Solomon and before. We encounter it in Proverbs: where we are told: “Does not wisdom call. And does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates, in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: ‘To you, O people, I call and my cry is to all that live.’” Wisdom, it seems beckons all of us. And this morning we find wisdom being spoken of in the Letter of James. Wisdom was often “Sofia,” a feminine quality. It was a vital commodity then and it is still important today.

We often like to think that as we grow older we grow wiser. I am sure you have noticed, as I have, that some do and some don’t. Then there are those occasions when we encounter a young person who we say is “older than her or his years.” That young person possesses a sort of wisdom, a knowledge that an old soul should more likely have.

So, where does wisdom come from? Solomon asked for the gift of discernment, the ability to know the difference between good and evil. This was the gift of wisdom. God granted him that gift and much more.

Our Bible tells us true wisdom is a God given gift. This well may be, but I suspect God has given each of us the capacity to become wise by planting seeds of wisdom within our beings. We need to realize this possibility and then nurture those little seeds into maturity.

One of those seeds is thoughtfulness. Used in the way we regard life and in the way we regard other people. If we practice thoughtfulness in life, we discover that we do not plunge into things before their time. Henry David Thoreau wrote: “It is characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.” Instead, we take a long and reasoned look at people and incidents in life and know that there is a reason for all the action and reaction we see around us. We try to understand what is up. We take our time and consider what we want to do.

Another little seed is a calmness of spirit. This can also be said to be a sense of inner peace. This is the ability to sit in a whirlwind and not have it draw us into it. Having calmness of spirit means that we have the knowledge that if we are able to remain centered in life, we will be able to figure things out logically and calmly before we act. We will not allow ourselves to be wounded by the slings and arrows of, sometimes, outrageous fortune. We understand that “this, too will pass” in spite of all our pushing and pulling, cajoling and threatening. There are things that are beyond our control. All our worry and fretting cannot help us move much around or back into order no matter how we think they might. Charles Doss put it this way, “Wisdom in this world is serenity of spirit...It is a refusal to question the ways, the machinations, and the divine purposes of God. It is contentment. It is the willingness to abide cheerfully by the

verdict of any court, of any jury, knowing full well that the true decision was handed down by God.”

Another important seed of wisdom is the understanding that we are a part of a much larger whole—we are a part of the universe, not the center of it. All of life is interlinked and deserves our respect. We have our rightful place and others have theirs. We are never to think more highly of ourselves than we do of anyone else. We are just a grain of sand on the wide beach of the cosmos. That’s a humbling thought, or should be.

Another seed may be found in our reading from the gospel in Mark when Jesus chides his disciples for arguing over which of them is the greatest. He takes a child and tells them that it is essential that they focus on what it is that is most important in life. When we discover what is the most important thing in life for us, what it is that preserves the highest value, we have discovered a bit of wisdom. A large bit of wisdom.

What is most important? Is it money, fame, love, respect, what others may think of us? What is it? This requires time, calmness, thoughtfulness and understanding just where it is we fit in the broader scheme of things. Doc Childre and Deborah Rozman wrote that “It is no longer enough to be smart -- all the technological tools in the world add meaning and value only if they enhance our core values, the deepest part of our heart. Acquiring knowledge is no guarantee of practical, useful application. Wisdom implies a mature integration of appropriate knowledge, a seasoned ability to filter the inessential from the essential.” In the language of our day and time, this is basically what Jesus was saying.

Ah, warns the author of the Letter of James, but there are different kinds of wisdom. There is earthly wisdom, which he tells us is not worth much and there is heavenly wisdom which is everything. If we have wisdom that is based on bitterness, envy or selfish ambition in our hearts, that wisdom is unspiritual and “there will be disorder and wickedness of every kind.” If we tend to pursue our own selfish desires above everything else in life, we become shallow people. Often we resort to devious means to achieve our ends. When we do this we tend to walk away from all we know about the right way of living spelled out for us in our religious system. We may pursue wicked ways and eventually may find ourselves in self-defeating disorder.

On the other hand, notes the author of James, the right kind of wisdom is “peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” Those are all those little seeds planted deep within us just waiting to grow. They are the seeds that allow us to consider others before ourselves, to be gracious even when we don’t really want to be, to keep from judging others and to expand the way we live our faith to and through all others.

When we grow in wisdom we will find that our outlook on life changes and that we begin to see our world more clearly through the eyes of Jesus. As his followers that is what we are asked to do. Amen