

As we've studied the Book of James together these last several weeks, I've mentioned periodically the strong connection between these writings and the books of Wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures. A careful reading of James reveals how much his thought is influenced by such books as Psalms and Proverbs and possibly books such as The Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach that were found in the Scriptures of Greek-speaking Jews at the time of Jesus but have been relegated to the Apocrypha by Protestants. I think it's important for us as Christians to retain our ties to the First Testament. There was a popular theologian in the middle of the second century A.D. named Marcion, who taught that the God portrayed in Jewish Scripture was not the same as the Father whom Jesus taught and that the Old Testament was worthless. That heresy only hung around until about 300 A.D. but the way we Christians sometimes act, you'd think it had become part of the received faith. Did you know, for example, that of the 2,400 language groups with portions of the Bible, roughly 1,115 have the whole New Testament, while only 426 have a full Bible, including the Old Testament? Translation experts estimate that only about 500 of the 1,700 Bible translation projects currently underway include the Hebrew Scriptures. But, when we consider that the scriptures that Jesus knew and quoted and that the apostles and gospel writers cited were from the older and larger section of our Bible, it's pretty clear that there is a great deal of worth in those writings for all Christians. I've been reviewing my sermons in preparation for having them posted on our website and I've realized with some dismay that I've been guilty of neglecting the Hebrew Scriptures as primary texts. I certainly intend to improve my efforts in that regard and to continue to try to highlight the connections between the two halves of our Book whenever possible.

I think it's particularly key for us this morning to look at these connections. The underlying theme in this passage is the difference between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. It will surely help us understand better and value more what James held to be the wisdom of God when we realize that this wasn't something he just made up on the spur of the moment, but that his picture of God's wisdom derived from the accumulated experience of generations of God's people, enhanced by the preaching of his brother, who we believe would know a little something about God's wisdom himself.

James' understanding that true wisdom comes from God is in line with many teachings from the Scriptures. Here are just some of the parallels from Proverbs, Wisdom and Sirach: "For the Lord gives wisdom; from God's mouth come knowledge and understanding." "(God), send (Wisdom) forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory send her, that she may labor at my side, and that I may learn what is pleasing to you." "All wisdom is from the Lord, and with him it remains forever." As did those great Jewish thinkers, James does not see wisdom as something that exists simply on an intellectual plane. Wisdom is what guides us to do what we do. "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom." In his commentary on this passage, Robert Linthicum writes, "...wisdom is not the accumulation, evaluation and use of information or knowledge. Rather, it is "right doing"; it is God-infused knowledge that is acted out and thus demonstrated as authentic through one's actions of justice and righteousness."

This concept of Wisdom as having an active component is also linked to Scripture. In both Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom is portrayed as a personified attribute of God, that part of the Divine that either assists in or actually accomplishes the ongoing work of Creation. In the Wisdom of Solomon we find this: “With you is wisdom, she who knows your works and was present when you made the world; she understands what is pleasing in your sight and what is right according to your commandments.” The description of Wisdom in Proverbs is even more exalted: “The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,

the first of his acts of long ago.

Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world’s first bits of soil.

When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.”

As Christian Trinitarian thought developed, these personifications of Wisdom became primarily associated with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. But there is also some connection with the second person of the Trinity, Christ. A Jewish philosopher named Philo, who lived in the great Egyptian center of learning, Alexandria, at around the time Jesus and James lived in Palestine, was very influential in the development of Christian thought. When Philo wrote of this personified Wisdom of God, he used the term λογος, the same word the Gospel of John uses to introduce Christ:

“In the beginning was (λογος) the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

In him was life; and the life was the light of humankind.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not...

That was the true Light, which lighteth every one that cometh into the world.

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.

He came unto his own, and his own received him not.

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the children of God, even to them that believe on his name...

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."

At this point, some of you are no doubt scratching your heads and thinking, "Proverbs? The Gospel of John? I thought we were hearing about the Book of James?" Hold on, it's coming back around. John says that the Word, the *λογος*, Wisdom is full of grace and truth. James says, "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." He goes on to say that following that wisdom brings "a harvest of righteousness... sown in peace for those who make peace." Jesus, who was that Wisdom made flesh said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Righteousness, that is right relationship with God and humankind, mercy, purity, peace; these are the fruits of God's wisdom, promised both by James and by his brother and Lord, Jesus.

The wisdom of the world is very different from the wisdom of God. Before we pursue those differences, I think it's important to note that James uses the word "world" in much the same way that Paul does. James is not here referring to Creation, the world which John tells us God loves so much that he sent his only begotten Son. No, James, like Paul, is talking about that destructive, anti-Creation spirit, force or mindset which pulls human beings away from God, turns us to selfish ends and puts us at odds with one another. Now, think for a minute about how we often hear the word "wise" used in conversation. We talk about wisecracks, those sarcastic weapons of the tongue often used to establish one's superiority of intellect over another, and wise guys, those who can use such verbal weapons with acumen. In other contexts, wise guys can refer to mobsters, members of a criminal gang, and generally those who've "made their bones," gangster speak for murder. Too often in the speech of the world, to be wise implies possessing power and using it for selfish or destructive purposes. The literature of the faithful can show a keen understanding of this abuse of wisdom. Think of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, in which one of the primary villains is one of "The Wise," the corrupted wizard, Saruman the White. And, in one of the Biblical books of Wisdom we've not yet discussed, Job, after a series of stinging rebukes by his friends, retorts, "No doubt but ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you."

All in all, it shouldn't take much convincing for all of us to recognize that the wisdom of the world is very different from the wisdom of God. We see the differences all around us. We know the truth of it when James says that the earthly, unspiritual, devilish wisdom is all about envy and selfish ambition, pride, conflicts, disputes and cravings. Our commercial language is full of words and images of craving, ambition, pride and envy. A popular fast-food chain in the Midwest markets their food under the phrase, "It's What You Crave!" For years we've been exhorted to grab for all the gusto we can get, assured that we deserve a break today, encouraged to want only the best and more and more and more of it. Of course, these overwhelming desires have their consequences.

The recent movie, “Super Size Me” about the health effects on a man who lived solely on that heavily touted fast food, documents just one simple example. In 1991, Pope John Paul II wrote, “In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way.”

I’ve mentioned before the work of theologian Lawrence Moore, who was a part of the corrupt power system in colonial Rhodesia before his crisis of conscience. Moore is certainly someone who understands the seductive nature of the wisdom of the world. For him, the craving, envy, pride and ambition of which James writes comes down to the desire for “power-over;” power over others, power over things, power over our surroundings. Moore points to what James says in 4:2, “You do not have, because you do not ask.” “Power-over,” Moore writes, “is about the power to *take*. Asking is an apparent sign of weakness. It means acknowledging that what you want or need is within the gift of someone else to give or withhold. In other words, it means being ‘powerless’.” Being powerless is something that is anathema to the wisdom of the world. Even though, as James has reminded us earlier, we have a loving Father who will give us all good things, the wisdom of the world tells us that we should want other things and that we should do whatever we have to do to get them.

Purity, peace, gentleness, yielding, mercy, righteousness. Envy, pride, selfishness, cravings, conflicts. As I contrast the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world, I become more and more disturbed by the words and actions of American leaders who claim the name of Christ and tout America as a great Christian nation. The latest news from Washington is that a compromise at the highest levels of our government means that certain forms of torture will no longer be utilized against those identified as our enemies. Of course, that means that other “interrogation techniques” that are widely held to be torture will continue to be used. Once again, this is an issue that cuts across traditional party lines. Rep. Ike Skelton of Missouri, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, called the agreement “promising,” while Republican Arlen Specter, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has voiced his concerns and scheduled a hearing Monday to explore that issue. Nor is this the only action in the so-called “war on terror” taken by Christian men and women that stands against the wisdom of God. The Associated Press, one of the most careful journalistic organizations in the country, estimates that there are over 14,000 “detainees” held by the U.S. government in foreign prisons, where they are denied even the simplest measure of due process, to know with what crime they are charged, and whom representatives of our government have repeatedly claimed are not covered by the “outmoded” rules and protections of the Geneva Convention. Where in these actions are peace, gentleness and mercy? Can this be what Jesus had in mind when he said, “love your enemies and bless those who curse you”?

Our government officials, especially the ones who identify themselves as Christians, need to hear from us that we are holding them accountable to the standards of Christ and the wisdom of God. I am not ready to call the President the Devil, as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez did this week. I may not agree with many of his policies or actions but I will give him the benefit of the doubt in the name of Jesus and assume that he’s just not

hearing enough from the voices who follow God's wisdom of peace and gentleness. But it is time for us to do whatever we can to promote James' understanding of God's wisdom and to let our elected leaders know that we expect them to pursue and promote true wisdom as well.

The Devil does come into this, though. James wrote, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." You may remember that in Isaiah, the devil is identified as Lucifer, the angel of light who rebelled against God, refusing to acknowledge God's lordship, attempting to take what he wanted rather than following God's plan. The sin of Lucifer has long been identified as the sin of pride. With a final quotation from Proverbs, James says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Once more, I think James had the example of Jesus in mind. Remember how Paul described Jesus to the Philippians? Unlike the ambitious Lucifer, Paul wrote of Jesus:

"being in very nature God,
(he) did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

We must remember, as James points out, that following the wisdom of the world, making friends with its adherents, means standing against God. As Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other." We are called to follow the example of Jesus and his humility and obedience to God. To be humble, to step away from the pride that is so much a part of the wisdom of the world, means to find true peace with one's self, not to seek to boost one's own status by putting others down, by seeking "power-over" them. It was the nature of Jesus, it is the nature of God, to be self-giving, to allow others the space to grow and to be fully who they are. This is how we are called to be in the world that God loves.

I was so proud yesterday to be even such a tiny part of the life of Katie Lavelle Yang. Over and over again, her family and friends described her generosity of spirit, her willingness to look out for others. I am proud to be a part of the lives of Jim and Carol Lavelle who have raised such a fine young woman and, since it does indeed take a village to raise a child, I am proud of this congregation, too, for it is in part your examples, influences and support of Jim and Carol that have made Katie what she is – a loving young woman in whom the world can see the reflection of Jesus.

Humility, obedience, peace, gentleness, mercy, righteousness. These are the attributes of the active wisdom of God in our lives. This is the model we have in Christ Jesus. James calls on us to follow this model, to give ourselves over to this wisdom. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." The Spirit of God brings us love, joy and peace as free gifts. We have free access to the loving

wisdom of God. But the world's wisdom will continue to batter at us, to seduce us, to pull us away from God's love. But we, weak as we are, have an answer. We may cling to Jesus; we may meditate day and night on the wisdom of God. "Just a closer walk with thee," is our plea to Jesus and we can be confident, always, that God hears our prayers and stands ready to shower us with all good gifts. Thanks be to God!