

Psalm 1  
James 3:13-4:10

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
September 23, 2018

## **Gentleness Born of Wisdom**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Our Psalm today offers two choices, two ways of life: the path that sinners tread, or the path of those who delight in the law of God. One way will perish; the other will prosper. Listen to these words from Psalm 1...

### *Introduction to the Epistle Lesson*

Our Lesson from the Epistle of James describes two kinds of wisdom: one is marked by envy, selfish ambition, and deceit; the other by peacefulness, gentleness, and mercy. To be a friend of worldly values is to be at enmity with God. Listen to these words from James 3:13-4:10...

### *Sermon*

A king was urged by his council of advisers to rid the country of all Jews. "They are a dishonest people," a senior adviser said. "They are not good members of the community. They stick to themselves, and they are not to be trusted."

"And yet," said the king, "they are highly intelligent."

"I don't wish to disagree," a second adviser said, "but I believe they are wise in a limited way. They know little about the real world." Well, the king loved the art of sign disputation—a type of debate using sign language instead of words. So he decided to issue a challenge. "We will hold a contest between the wisest person among my advisers and the wisest person among the Jews. Whoever loses will be forced to leave the country."

The contest was set for two weeks from that day. When members of the Jewish community heard about the challenge, they cried out in anguish. No one wanted to carry the fate of the entire community on their shoulders. As the leaders were ringing their hands, a Jewish farmer came in front of the community. "What is the matter with you?" he asked. "You all look terrible."

They told him of the challenge set forth by the king, explaining that they couldn't find an opponent for the wisest of the king's advisers. "I'm your man," the farmer said confidently. "I'll match wits with anyone from the king's court." Since the farmer was the only one willing to meet in the sign disputation, the community accepted his offer.

When the day of the contest arrived, the two opponents met in a large open area surrounded by large crowds. The king pointed to his adviser to begin.

First, the king's adviser raised his arms toward the sky extending all his fingers. At this, the farmer raised one arm with his hand in a fist. Then the king's adviser pointed his arm toward the farmer, with two fingers spread apart. The farmer quickly raised his arm, with one finger in front of his face. Finally, the adviser reached into his pocket and took out a piece of cheese. The farmer reached into his pocket and pulled out an egg.

At this, the king's adviser dropped his head, shook the farmer's hand, and walked away in defeat. Meanwhile, the crowd of Jewish people began a wild celebration.

When the other members of the king's court rallied around the adviser, he explained what happened. "I raised my arms toward the sky extending my fingers, declaring that our king has the power to scatter the farmer and his people all over the earth. He countered by raising a single fist, declaring that God would hold them together."

"Next," the adviser said, "I held up two fingers to tell him there are two kings—one in heaven and one on earth. He raised one finger, declaring that one king rules over all."

"Finally," the adviser continued, "I brought out a piece of cheese to say that all religion is growing old and moldy. But he brought out an egg to say it is still fresh and whole. He was a noble and wise opponent, and to think he was a mere farmer."

Meanwhile, the Jewish people gathered around their new hero asking for an explanation of what had happened. "It is quite simple," he declared. "Before I knew the contest had started, he raised up both arms threatening to knock me over. I shook my fist in his face to say, 'If you do, I'll fight back.'"

"Then," went on the farmer, "the king's adviser spread out his fingers to poke me in both my eyes and I countered by threatening to poke him in his eyes. By then he must have given up. He took out his lunch, so I took out mine."

The king, who had watched the contest and had his own explanation of the outcome, sent all of his advisers out of the country and replaced them with a council of farmers.

Our scripture this morning from the Epistle of James asks, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” In the school we might think that this is the student with the highest grades or the teacher with the highest degree. In the church we might think that this is the minister and the church officers. In the judiciary we might think that this is the person on the Supreme Court. But of course, in all of these, what we might initially think, is not necessarily so.

In our Epistle Lesson James lifts up a number of indicators of God-given wisdom in the lives of individuals. Wisdom from above is gentle and humble, pure, peaceable, and willing to yield, full of mercy, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. Such traits are not easily attainable. They speak of a life that is not ego-driven, not grasping or envious.

In literature we see it in Atticus Finch, the attorney in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, played brilliantly by Gregory Peck in the movie. Atticus was the widowed father of two kids, Jem and “Scout.” He was quiet, rather than brash, polite rather than macho. He was able to walk away from insults. He didn’t smoke, gamble, or drink. He liked to walk instead of drive. He was respected by everyone, including the rich and the poor. Atticus Finch was willing to make the honorable decision, even when that decision was unpopular. He was willing to defend a black man in the midst of his hometown’s ingrained prejudice. In the book he describes for Scout his decision to take the Robinson case this way:

“This case, Tom Robinson’s case, is something that goes to the essence of a man’s conscience—Scout, I couldn’t go to church and worship God if I didn’t try to help that man.”

“Atticus, you must be wrong...”

“How’s that?”

“Well, most folks seem to think they’re right and you’re wrong…”

“They’re certainly entitled to think that, and they’re entitled to the full respect of their opinions,” said Atticus, “but before I can live with other folks, I’ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.”

Gentleness born of wisdom.

We tend to think of wisdom describing something about one’s intellect, a matter largely of the head, rather than the heart. James understands wisdom in a quite different way. So in answer to his question, “Who is wise and understanding among you,” we hear something surprisingly non-intellectual: “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” So that James’ wisdom has mostly to do with how a person lives.

In a society set on self-gratification, the pursuit of money and power, often at the expense of others, these words may sound quite strange to us. But they may be embodied by what we might otherwise describe as average students and teachers, or church members, or people whose status is not noted as anything of significance by the world—like farmers. And James warns that if envy and selfish ambition reign in our hearts, we do not know the wisdom that is from above, but a wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish.

Beverly Gaventa, who taught at Columbia and Princeton Seminaries, says that of themselves, envy and selfish ambition might not seem to deserve such sharp condemnation. But as James notes, they lead to disorder, anarchy, and every foul deed. And doesn’t this describe much of the conduct that we see in Washington today?

But 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. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. (3:17-18)

So righteousness is associated with peacemaking. Heavenly wisdom leads us to be peacemakers in our homes and in our schools, in business and industry, in churches and in governments. If we are driven by personal ambition and jealousy, we will not pursue peace. Conflict resolution calls for an openness to reason, mercy, impartiality, and sincerity.

Many people covet something they cannot have. A big house in a nice neighborhood. A new car. A large retirement account, finer furniture, new clothes—believing these are the things that make for the good life. But the good life is not found in amassing more material goods. Rather it is found in works that are done with gentleness born of wisdom. When a person is truly humble, self-giving, and kind, then wisdom will be used for the benefit of others, not simply for one's self. The wisdom that comes from above enables us to be self-composed and disciplined in the way we relate to others.

Gentleness born of wisdom leads to contentment—the most effective antidote to the problem of envy. When we are truly content with what we have, there is a freedom that is unlike anything the world can provide. It truly is the good life.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.