

September 19, 2021 - 17th Sunday after Pentecost - Sermon notes

Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 1, James 3:13 -4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37

Living Wisely

Wisdom is defined as: “the ability to use your knowledge and experience to make good decisions and judgments” (the Cambridge English Dictionary). As we have learned over the past year in particular knowledge isn't of just one kind. I say this because two people faced with what appears to be the same information can come to drastically different conclusions. This is because the knowledge we use to help make those decisions is often acquired with a particular world view attached. The world view which is attached may include, for instance, the idea that all governments are corrupt and ought to be resisted at all costs or the world view may include the idea that evidence based on science is to be believed. Our news reports are filled with people making what they believe to be wise choices but they could not be much more different from one another. We too are influenced by a variety of world views and the disciples of Jesus were no different in that regard. They had been raised with one world view and Jesus was showing them a very different one. As they walked down the road they were arguing based on the world view with which they were raised about who was greater. This 'top of the hill' kind of approach is one with which we are all very familiar. It includes the view that the point of the journey is to get to the 'front of the line' which can sometimes lead to some pretty unpleasant behaviours. Jesus held out a very different world view which included the idea of service to others as the point of the journey. Greatness in the kingdom of this world is realized by accumulation of money and possessions and a focus on the self while greatness in Jesus' kingdom is realized by emptying oneself for the sake of our fellow travelers. The wisdom of the first community I've described is very different from the wisdom of the second community partly because of the source of that wisdom. The first kind of kingdom is the one we meet most often in the society in which we live while the second is more rare but the second is the one which the world yearns to live in because it is the one where true justice, true beauty, true love comes from. Self-centred actions betray a connection to the first kingdom while self-sacrifice betrays a connection to the second. Jesus lives in this second kingdom and its world view is seen in Jesus' actions and we are all invited to join him in that kingdom. As we take a look at this portion of the disciples' journey with Jesus we are shown the contrast between the world in which they lived and its wisdom and the world in which Jesus lives and its wisdom. One type of wisdom is informed from the world while the other is informed by heaven. From which do you wish to obtain your knowledge on which to base your good decisions and judgements? As the disciples argued about who was greatest Jesus offered them a completely different perspective on the way the universe works. As

you and I walk along the road with Jesus we too are offered a completely different perspective on the way the universe works from what the world around us thinks. In the world around us 'might makes right' and 'the one with the most toys at the end wins'. In the world around us the desires of the individual sometimes outweigh the needs of the many. The wisdom of God is seen as foolishness to someone who believes that the point of it all is to be first in line. But the wisdom of God is the only true wisdom because the other is based on the lies of the enemy of God.

St. James also has a much different perspective on life compared with the messages we hear every day from the media that impacts our life. He said, "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom" St. James is offering in this short letter some advice to people who have been spread throughout the known world. Since the time of the exile Jewish people had moved away from the Promised Land to make a life but continued to look to Jerusalem and the Torah for their guidance and rule of life. Some of these Jews had come to believe that Jesus was (and is) God's Anointed One - the Messiah - and took that belief into their communities. While in those communities they were urged to 'let your light so shine before others that they would see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven' (Matt 5:16) James says something very similar to the people who have been disbursed throughout the Roman Empire. He urged his readers to live lives that demonstrate the goodness and gentleness that is born of God's wisdom. As he does so he warns them of aspects of life which will threaten that gentleness. Living wisely requires constant decision making in order to maintain that standard and James points out some of the pitfalls that can threaten that wise living. He also points out that wisdom itself comes in some different forms and from different sources and warns his readers about being careful to examine the source of wisdom.

This is much like what I've been saying regarding the differing world views. Wisdom that comes from God will result in lives of gentleness and peacemaking, according to St. James, and that is to be desired over all the other choices available. Wisdom indeed comes from several sources and James urges his readers to allow the wisdom that comes from God to shape their behaviour in such a way that the source for their behaviour will be noticed.

Of the things that indicate a wisdom from a source other than God we hear James list envy and selfish ambition. For some people, sadly, a life which includes envy and selfish ambition seems to be the highest form of wisdom - 'do to others before they do it to you' - 'get all you can' - 'climb over the backs of others on your way to the top' - and so on. This is not to be the way of the follower of Jesus. Who is greatest among us? According to Jesus the one who would be first among us must be last of all and servant of all. This is wisdom that has come down from heaven and will result in gentleness,

goodness, peacemaking and love. We are faced with these choices on a daily basis and so are the people all around us. Living wisely is done by following the path that comes from God and not being fooled into following the path that comes from the enemy of God.

Finally, let me remind you of the words we heard from the Psalmist. In the first Psalm the writer paints a picture of a tree planted by a stream of water. A tree in that setting will not have leaves that wither and whatever fruit the tree is meant to produce will be come at the right time. The metaphor points to the case of a follower of Jesus Christ who allows himself or herself to be planted by the living water and who accesses that water on a regular basis. Other choices are available but the wise person would choose the living water - the path of life. The wicked, we are told, will perish and not enjoy the life God promises. At times the wicked do seem to thrive but that is an illusion and has fooled many people into following the wisdom that comes from this world. We, who have been touched by God's Holy Spirit and re-born into the family of God have access to a very different perspective.

So, what is your world view? Where is your knowledge coming from? Are you close to the living water? Perhaps you've never taken the time to think of these questions but, it would seem from the Psalmist and St. James, that these are important questions to face. Jesus once said, 'Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' (Matt. 11:28-30) If you want to live this life wisely then Jesus and his world view is the way to find that path. Perhaps today is a good day to dedicate (or re-dedicate) yourself to that goal and allow yourself to be planted (or re-planted) by the stream of living water. *"Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom"*