

Palisades Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
The 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 20, 2009

Gentle as Wisdom
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Reading
James 3:13-43, 7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, sinful. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 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.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist sin, and sin will flee from you. Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.

“Who is wise and understanding among you?”

Doesn't that question sort of “stop you”? It does me. “Who is wise among you?”

I did a search. Just for the heck of it. I searched for wise people. I got a Dali Lama here, a Nelson Mandela there, but not much else.

I think of Spock, Obi One Kanobi, Gandolf – aliens, Jedi Knights, wizards...entertaining, instructive, and filled with good messages...but not quite enough...

So I read more of James to see where to go next...

“Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”

Now, adding the word “gentle” to the equation, a “gentleness born of wisdom” a few more people come to mind, interestingly enough, people I know. Gentle. Kind. Souls. Patient. Important in my life. Models. Mentors. Saints.

Equating gentleness with wisdom, agreeing with James that gentleness comes out of wisdom, means that this is a room full of gentleness, full of wisdom.

And, it all makes sense, doesn't it? I know that I feel the most “wise” when I am the most gentle, even if I haven't thought of it in those terms. I do feel best about myself and the way I handle myself, when the resolution of something has come from kind, gentle, and true acts.

I took a few moments and did some research on the word “wise.” I tried to find a bit of information about the root of the word, in particular in terms of the way James might have used it in the First Century CE.

There are some indications that the Greek origin may be the word: *eidos and eide*, which, when used in Greek philosophy had the meaning of seeing “the essence of each thing and its primary substance.” You can hear the origin of “idea” in the word, as well. And it makes sense.

Seeing the essence of each thing and its primary substance. Our essence; our primary substance – could be God and Love; Love (God) and Wisdom; ...I went a bit further

There is a more well-know reference to *wisdom* as *Sophia*. *Sophia* was adopted in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), replacing the Hebrew word for Sophia: *Chokmah* or *Hokmot*.

The word *Chokmah* most often was placed in conjunction with another Hebrew word: *Shekinah*, which refers to the glory of God or the glittering presence of God.

By all accounts in the TANAKH, Shekinah and Sophia precede the creation of the universe in the cosmology of events; both are seen as feminine.

Proverbs 8, referred to as "Wisdom's Call" refers to its existence long before the earth was created. Verses 22 – 31 underscore the early presence of *Sophia*:

(Excuse the male references. I keep them here to maintain the poetic structure of the passage): This is *Sophia* speaking. The references to LORD are to GOD:

²² "The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;

²³ I was appointed from eternity,
from the beginning, before the world began.

²⁴ When there were no oceans, I was given birth,
when there were no springs abounding with water;

²⁵ before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,

²⁶ before he made the earth or its fields
or any of the dust of the world.

²⁷ I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
²⁸ when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
³⁰ Then I was the craftsman at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
³¹ rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind. (shasooah)

Delighting in us.

Sophia, Wisdom, Gentleness delighting in us. Imagine that. Ever think of wisdom as with us, as the Spirit is, and actively “delighting” in us. Sort of makes you “bubble over”!

Linking this with James, then, wisdom and gentleness is elemental to all that we are. It is in gentleness that we display wisdom and in wisdom that gentleness is found.

I know that is true. Some of the greatest challenges of my own have included being gentle in certain situations.

It’s easy, sometimes, and it may be right that certain situations called for something other than gentleness, maybe even a sternness, or more. Yet, I wonder, I wonder if the reason I sought being “harder,” for example, was because that was the language that needed to be spoken, or was it because I lacked the wisdom to know how to use the gentleness called for in a particular moment.

A bit more of James:

...wisdom from above [which] 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 [then] sown in peace for those who make peace.

That sounds wonderful, true, and I know it's not always easy. The opposite is sometimes true, as we are reminded by Three Dog Night in "Easy to be Hard"

How can people be so heartless
How can people be so cruel
Easy to be hard, easy to be cold

So, all week long I've been thinking about James and my comments this morning. At one point I decided I would just ask Jerry to preach again LOL.

There has been a lot going on this week, and in one way or another, it pointed to the idea of wisdom, gentleness, *teshuva* – returning home – to the core of who we are and what we believe.

Our Muslim friends just finished their fasting last night for Ramadan and we wish them "Eid Mubarak," or Happy Festivities as they feast today, after 30 days of fasting.

And our Jewish sisters and brothers have entered into their New Year of 5770, and we wish them all L'shanah tovah – a Happy New Year!

There have been news reports of families receiving troops home from their tours in Afghanistan and elsewhere. One report had a wife saying that all she wanted to do was hold her husband's hand, after her being away for 17 months in the mountainous regions of conflict. I felt a tear.

And of course conflicts, violence, arguments, politics hovering just above or below the truth, and a church – our church that continues to struggle with justice – for our friends on the street, for our LGBT Community (the Study on Civil Unions and Christian Marriage was

just released today – I have some copied and you can download it online from janhus.org).

In each case though, I saw James' words. They were comforting in one way and revelatory in another – that still, 2000 years later – we share the same problems of the 1st century CE.

And the coming home, the teshuvah, is our theme for an upcoming day of celebration at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House.

We've been preparing for our own Homecoming Celebration on October 4th, which is also World Communion Day. It will be a time and a day of celebrating those who are part of our community, past and present. Please spread the word and plan to come – and plan to bring a friend and a dish! It promises to be a day of gentleness and welcoming and gratitude!

In fact, homecoming could have been the theme all this week...

The International Pre-School has begun, once again, the Extreme Gymnastics groups are back in action, our Monday and Thursday morning Play School is off to a great start, Carter Burden is filled with energy, and the demands of our services are being pressed more and more, as sisters and brothers come to us each and every day for food, guidance, and hope.

Clearly, in this small community of ours, we try to practice this art of wisdom, of seeing each other in the fullness of gentleness, born out of the Origins that preceded time and our knowledge, linkages to eternity that are fundamentally rooted in who we are and who we were meant to be.

And, in many ways, who we are called to be is this "Good Landlord," who I choose to call the "Gentle Provider." More than anything. More than contracts. More than revenues, boundaries, or subscription to rules – all of which are important and incumbent upon the parties involved, but more than that, we are called to gentleness and kindness toward one another, in other words to practice wisdom – in attempt to practice the church we one day hope to be.

Why? Well, I think James has it pretty well defined. Our biggest problems come from the things we want – and believing that we can get them ourselves. I had that driven expectation for quite a while. In my own way, I found out what James said back in the day:

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist sin, and sin will flee from you. Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.

It's the last part: "Submit you therefore to God. Resist sin – distance from God. Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.

It's the gentleness that keeps the door open. Trusting in God that if we do the legwork, the outcome will be right and just – and maybe different than we expect. Probably different than we expect, and that's ok, for our expectations become the cravings of war and sin, because they pull us away from God and into our own devices, and shortcomings. There is, for many of us – no gentleness and no wisdom there.

Who is wise and understanding among us? It appears it is those who are the gentlest among us.

My wish and prayer for you is the same I have for me...

Me we continue to grow in such gentleness and wisdom, and God.