

Pastor's Message – 9/22/24
James 3:13—4:8a

Early in my working life, I think it was my first real job, I was given a bonus for something or other – a gift certificate to a record store. I really wasn't into pop music, so when I went to redeem it, I had the hardest time because I recognized very few of the artists. I had heard a song by a duo – Seals and Crofts – that's about the only one I recognized, so I chose a cassette tape – remember those?

Anyhow, there was one song on that tape that has stuck with me for these last almost 50 years. The refrain went,

Darling if you want me to be closer to you

Get closer to me

Darling if you want me to be closer to you

Get closer to me

Darling if you want me to love, love only you

Then love only me

Darling if you want me to see, see only you

Then see only me

I wasn't impressed by the sentiment and have puzzled over it since then. It sounded like the singer was saying that he was going as far as he was going to go and, if they were going to be closer, it was up to his girlfriend to do all the work and make all the adjustments. Sounded selfish or stubborn or . . .

But today, James writes in verse eight, "Come close to God, and God will come close to you." Is that the same sentiment? Does God only come so far, and we have to come the rest of the way? Hasn't God given everything that we might be saved and have the possibility to come to Him?

It reminds me of the story of the older couple out for a drive one day. The woman complained to her husband that they used to sit right next to each other, he with his arm around her, whenever they would take a drive together. His comment was, "I've never moved."

On this 3rd Sunday of our James series, James continues to offer pearls of wisdom for us. He continues to write very practically about our faith and how we act because of our faith. He continues to offer

advice about what it means to be people in relationship with God and in relationship with others and how believers relate to the world. He addresses the conflicts that can come up between people – even in the church – why they occur and how to avoid them.

James is writing about a conflict between earthly things and heavenly things. For James, there are things of the world and there are things of heaven. James is not being a religious fanatic. To be sure, this kind of language has been used by leaders in many religions, including Christianity, to justify negative and sometimes violent responses to “others” who do not share the same religious commitments.

But this text was not written to “others.” It was written to Christians, people already in the household of faith. For the faithful among them, these were reminders of what it takes to remain faithful. For the “backsliders,” these are warning of the peril that lies before them if they continue to follow the paths Jesus had delivered them from rather than returning to his way. Both are still “in the house” at this point, though. “They” are “us.” James’ words today are for us in the church.

James is saying that followers of Jesus are expected to show they have received and are motivated by “the wisdom from above.” James contrasts the wisdom from above with other forms of teaching and ways of life claiming to be wisdom but that are really “earthly, unspiritual, and demonic” (3:15). The difference between heavenly and “earthly” wisdom can be discerned in how people treat one another. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambitions are signs of earthly wisdom at work. Treating others with gentleness and mercy while doing good works are a sign of the wisdom “from above.”

This week’s lesson from James concerns wisdom. It is posed around the question of whose wisdom we follow: the wisdom of God or the wisdom of the world? For James, the answer to this question is found not in what we say, but in what we do. And James is very clear that we can’t have it both ways. We either follow the wisdom of God, or we follow the wisdom of the world. There is wisdom in the world, but true wisdom is God’s wisdom. What passes for wisdom **of** the world is no wisdom at all.

James defines the two. He says the wisdom of the world cultivates a life defined by “bitter [jealousy] and selfish ambition,” while the wisdom of God is “first pure, then peace loving, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and fruit of good deeds, without a trace of favoritism and is always sincere” (verses 14 and 17).

My thoughts could be construed as judgmental, but three questions come up for me when I consider James' writings. Does the absence of conflict in the church, in our personal lives, in our families mean, then, that we are on the right track to a holy life? And conversely, does the presence of conflict mean that we are on the wrong track: more earthly than heavenly? Do those who initiate, ferment, or promote conflict – are they on the wrong track?

Rather than looking at others, these questions, I think, should be personal. Maybe its good to take stock of our own lives and examine what our lifestyles reveal about whose wisdom, God's wisdom or the wisdom of the world, we really follow. Not that we can't question God - God is big enough - but questioning ideas of Godly wisdom can help us to stay on the right track.

A wise and religious man sat under a mango tree in his garden in the noonday heat, and he looked at his pumpkin vines growing nearby. He said to himself, “How foolish God is. Here he puts a big heavy pumpkin onto a weak vine, which can't do anything but just lie on the ground. And then he hangs those small mangoes onto a tree which can hold the weight of a man. If I were God, I think I could do better than that.”

Just then a bit of a breeze came up and knocked a loose mango off the tree. It fell right on the man's head. Now he had a bump on his head which made him a sadder and wiser man.

“Suppose,” he thought now, “that there had been a pumpkin up there, instead of a mango Never again will I try to plan the world for God, but I shall thank God that he has done so well.”

God gives us His wisdom that we might be changed and become holy and ever closer to Him.

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. ... But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that

causes pain and does not seem to make sense. What on Earth is He up to?

The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of -- throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage; but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

Neither God nor the devil will draw near where they are unwelcome. We choose whom to welcome and whom to reject and flee from. That is one of the hallmarks of the Christian faith.

Each time that we welcome new Professing Members into the Church, we ask them to reaffirm their baptismal promises. Specifically, I ask the question, "On behalf of the whole church: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? I hope you can answer, **"I do."** I ask further, "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?" Again, I hope you can answer, **"I do."**

To say yes to those questions requires a level of humility. To say yes to those questions requires that each of us submits to God and God's desire for our lives. To say yes to those questions requires that, instead of turning away from God, we come closer to Him. God chases us, but we have the freedom to run away. Our lives, in our families, in our church, in our very souls reflect whose wisdom we follow: God's or the wisdom of the world which is no wisdom. God's wisdom leads to peace and the world's wisdom results in quarrels and fights. Look around -- what do you see mostly in the world -- peace or war? Unity or division?

God offers a promise through James. We can choose: God or the world. One leads one way and the other the opposite direction. "Those who are peacemakers," James says, "will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness." That is what I want, and I suspect you do too: peace instead of war, unity instead of division, God's way instead of the devil's way. Our actions will lead us one way or the other. "Come close to God, and God will [be] close to you."