

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Pentecost 18B - Proper 20B
September 22, 2024
James 3:13–4:10; Mark 9:30-37

Wisdom from Above

And [Jesus] sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35 ESV)

In the name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

Many people, if not most, think themselves to be wise and understanding. Most people think themselves to be a good, if not a great person. And they want others to think of them as they think of themselves. They desire praise and plaudits, prestige and position. They're often so turned in on themselves that the "I" crowds out other people and their needs and how they might be in a position to serve them. Their attention to self crowds out devotion to God and how to serve Him.

We need to be aware that this is often our problem too. Though we are children of God, we still have this old self-centered sinful nature to deal with our whole life long. Thus we need to have our self-centeredness forgiven, and we need to have our minds transformed to think in new ways about life--and then to actually live that way, to put it into practice. And this new way of thinking and living is "Wisdom from Above."

Listen to what James says: "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." (James 3:13-18).

Notice though that wisdom is not just a matter of being smart, of knowing a lot of stuff. Rather, true wisdom will show itself in how we live our lives, in our character and conduct. This is the wisdom that comes down from above, heavenly wisdom, God's kind of wisdom. This is how God would have His Christians think and act.

So, what about your inner thoughts, those thoughts that are hidden from others, perhaps, but are not hidden from God? Is there some selfishness in there? Maybe a lot of selfishness, in one form or another. What about jealousy, when we envy the praise or the good things in life that others are having? And when this self-seeking attitude works its way into our relationships with other people--in our church, in our household, in our family--what is the result? Disorder. Conflict. Harmony is broken. Bitterness. Unforgiveness. Resentment.

As James puts it: "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" (James 4:1). Can you recognize this bad fruit evident in your life? Have you seen it disturb the harmonious relationships that ought to be there in a marriage, in a family, in a congregation? My friends, this is not the wisdom from above. No, this is, in the words of James, "earthly, unspiritual, demonic." The devil loves nothing better than to stir up your selfish nature and so stir up dissent and disharmony among brothers and sisters. This takes our eyes off our Lord. It takes our eyes off loving and serving our neighbor. This is not good.

So, what do we do when we recognize this tendency in ourselves? Repent. James tells us: "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord." (James 4:8-10).

"Humble yourselves before the Lord," James says, but that's not the end of it. "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." That's the rest of the story. The Lord will exalt you, He will lift you up. This is the grace of our God, His unmerited favor and forgiveness. James writes: "But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" (James 4:6)

God's grace is such that He forgives us our failures to love and serve. He forgives us our stinking selfishness. God is in the business of forgiving and cleansing damned, dirty sinners such as you and I are. "He gives more grace." Indeed, God gives His only Son! Grace and truth and wisdom come through Jesus Christ.

The wisdom that comes down from above takes the form of the one "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven," and was made man. Christ, the Son of God incarnate--He is God's Wisdom in human flesh. It was for this purpose--to rescue us from ourselves--that Christ laid down His life on our behalf. Jesus was lifted up, but He was lifted up on a cross, to suffer the pangs of death as the sacrifice for all the sinners of the world--including you, dear one.

Jesus told His disciples, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." (Mark 9:31). Do you

understand what this means? Jesus' death and resurrection does the job! What Christ came to do is complete! Mission fulfilled! Sins covered, completely forgiven. Life triumphs, the Christ-life that lives forever, that triumphs over death and even now reigns in life. You are a new person, dear Christian, joined to Jesus in baptism. There is a new you available. A "you" that will live for others and not only for self. A "you" that wants to serve the God who has redeemed you. This is the renewing of your mind, the transforming of your thinking.

Here we see this new nature manifested in our relationships. "The meekness of wisdom," James calls it. This is acting in "gentleness" or "humility." Meekness is to be like Jesus, really. It is to be so strong and secure that you are willing to take the lower part, in humility, and to bend down and serve others. That is a strength of character. It is to be secure in who you are in Christ, so that you do not have to be ever grasping and looking out for Number One. It is to take the lower part, in service to others. Your strength and your security and your confidence are found in Christ, and nothing can shake that. So you are freed up to serve. This is a good thing, and it is pleasing to God.

Jesus gives us an example of this wisdom from above when He talks to His self-seeking disciples in today's Gospel reading. They were quarreling about who was the greatest among them. It's the same old thing. They were a lot like you and me in that respect. So Jesus turns things upside-down on them, which is really rightside-up. "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35). Really? The servant is really the greatest? The one who lets himself be last is really first? Yes, indeed! After all, who does this more than Jesus Himself? The one who came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many? There is no greater Servant than Jesus Himself.

And Christ would have His disciples do likewise. So Jesus takes a little child and sets him in their midst. "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." (Mark 9:37). Do you want to be great? Serve this little child. Serve the one who is vulnerable, the one who can't do anything for you, the one who needs your service. These people may not get you ahead in the world. They can seem kind of insignificant--powerless people, on the fringe. But if they've got no one to look after them, maybe God would like to take care of them. You see, God has a thing about caring for the poor and lonely and the last and the least and the lost in society. And maybe God would like to do that kind of caring through you. Think about it. Keep your eyes open this week for opportunities. Remember who you are in Christ. This puts a different perspective on things, doesn't it? This is wisdom that comes only from above. This is wise living.

In the beginning of the James's Epistle, he writes: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." (James 1:5). So, take God up on His promise. Ask God for His wisdom and thus serve your neighbor. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener
Pastor

Immanuel Lutheran Church of Augsburg
1297 E 900 Ave.
Shobonier, IL 62885
church: (618) 846-8383
personal cell: 330-204-4180