

"The Wisdom to Serve" based on Psalm 54, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a and Mark 9:30-37
Delivered at Absecon Presbyterian Church Sept.19, 2021 by Ruling Elder David R. Watts, Pulpit Supply

What is wisdom? The dictionary defines wisdom as 1) the ability to discern inner qualities and relationships (insight), 2) having good sense (judgement), 3) a generally accepted belief or 4) accumulated philosophical or scientific learning (knowledge).

When I asked my son what comes to mind, when he thinks of wisdom, he said an owl. I did not expect that for an answer. But thinking about it, we do see it as a symbol for wisdom. Disney did place an owl in most of its animated films. "Snow White" encountered an owl when she was running in the woods in search of an escape, "Bambi" had an owl to guide, "The Sword in the Stone" had an owl teacher and even "Winnie the Pooh" had "Friend Owl". But the bible speaks of the Wisdom of Solomon.

Solomon was offered a gift from God and he chose Wisdom. Who can forget the story of the two women each claiming to be the mother of the same child, Solomon offers to cut it in half, the real mother offers to give up her child, in order to let the child live. Something a mother would do. The battle is resolved, heavenly wisdom presents itself and Solomon awards the child to the real mother. For James, wisdom is not in the head, but in the behavior. It is a way of life, not a way of thinking or believing.

James asks, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your good works are done with gentleness born of wisdom." He states that "Wisdom is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy". God is listed as the source of true wisdom and, as we saw with Solomon, will be given to those who seek it. To be wise is not to be enlightened or learned, but to know how to live ethically in God's grace. James makes a connection between faith and wisdom, between faith and works born of ethical living.

Another way of translating the qualities James is seeking is to list them as being innocent, peaceful, tolerant, obedient, compassionate, and non-judgmental. To be wise, faith is required as is the right motivation. The only way to enjoy the blessings of God, is to submit to God, to draw near to God so that God may draw near to us (4:7-8a). The community James is writing to is suffering from social differences, gossip, slander, envy and desire for material things in a hope for self-centered power. It sounds like our world today. Difficult times are experienced when we have trouble interacting with each other. Jesus addresses this division, not in terms of power, but on the basis of service to others (Mark 9:30-37).

When divisions occur today on the basis of social class, political preferences, education and culture we know that true wisdom and knowledge comes from God. We must invest our lives in others disregarding desires for power. James said that works done with gentleness, born of wisdom, result in the fruits of a good life (3:13). This is wisdom from above, divine wisdom, reflecting the very nature of God. Our current social and political climate are not conducive to the virtues James is expecting in us. We are reminded to serve those in need generously and ungrudgingly. We cannot let our churches or ourselves mirror the world's conflicts at the

expense of others. James counsels that it is appropriate to request help from God. "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly (1:5). The God to whom James bears witness is the God of Wisdom giving birth to gentleness in our lives toward others, describing us as peaceable, gentle, and willing to yield. With this in mind we will find wisdom at work within our congregations. Gorbachov, the former leader of the Soviet Union, once said, "There are those who do not understand the importance of cooperation. There should be no place for such people in politics." James would add, there should be no place for such people in our congregations. Cooperation equates to service.

In our Gospel, Jesus says, "For the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve." (Mark 10:45). Jesus instructs his followers to serve as a means to salvation. He further states that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and the servant of all." (9:35) To serve the needy comes as a liberating word, rather than as a demand. Jesus calls his disciples to emulate a child, who has no status or position of privilege. When we are able to do this, we welcome Jesus and the one who sent Him, God the Father. (9:37) There are times when it is easier to remain silent, rather than admit hearing what we do not want to hear. It is easier to keep quiet and pretend we do not understand, rather than get an answer we do not want to follow. By welcoming the child, we assign worth and importance to every person, at every level. We move away from concerns about power and things that do not matter, toward greatness coming from serving others. We need to care for and serve the vulnerable in our society, those who cannot return the favor. Greatness does come from welcoming the marginalized people in need in our everyday society, thereby welcoming Jesus and God the Father.

The disciples failed to understand and comprehend what Jesus was telling them, our society does the same. Jesus gathers them and tells them not to fight for power but to become servants of all, giving their lives in service for others. Failure to comprehend continues today, in our time. We still argue about greatness and still fail to follow Jesus in the path of service. James' text gives the words of Jesus, keeping our eyes on what counts – mercifulness, peacemaking, generosity, true wisdom, discipleship and submitting ourselves to following Jesus' example. The call is clear, the disciples are asked to commit to God and service to the least of God's powerless children, expecting nothing in return.

A key to learning and understanding, is to ask questions, requiring courage to risk embarrassment and vulnerability in the presence of others. By not asking questions we live a lie by giving the impression that we understand when we do not. Jesus spelled it out for his disciples, telling them that in order to be first, they must be last and willing to be the servant and lowest among them, reversing everything that they had ever heard. This reversal must have shocked them as much as it shocks us. To make his point clear, Jesus takes a child into his embrace, welcoming them as important in the social order of the day. He establishes a new order of justice reversing the social norm and restoring health to those who are sick and disabled. He restores dignity and value to children, women and outcasts. He shows us that wisdom is found in service to those in need.

Can we do anything less, and still call ourselves followers and disciples of Christ? Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

Mark 9:30-37 (NLT) ***Leaving*** that ***region***, they ***traveled*** through ***Galilee***. ***Jesus*** didn't want anyone to know he was there, for he ***wanted*** to ***spend*** more ***time*** with his ***disciples*** and ***teach*** them. He said to them, "The ***Son*** of ***Man*** is going to be ***betrayed*** into the ***hands*** of his ***enemies***. He will be ***killed***, but three ***days*** later he will ***rise*** from the ***dead***." They didn't ***understand*** what he was saying, however, and they were ***afraid*** to ask him what he ***meant***. After they ***arrived*** at ***Capernaum*** and ***settled*** in a ***house***, Jesus ***asked*** his disciples, "What were you ***discussing*** out on the ***road***?" But they didn't ***answer***, because they had been ***arguing*** about which of them was the ***greatest***. He ***sat*** down, ***called*** the ***twelve*** disciples over to him, and said, "Whoever wants to be first must take last ***place*** and be the ***servant*** of everyone else." Then he ***put*** a little ***child*** among them. Taking the child in his ***arms***, he said to them, "Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my ***behalf*** welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not only me but also my ***Father*** who sent me."