

Sunday Sermon
September 23, 2018
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
“Wisdom From Above”

Introduction

The Highway Department repaved a secondary road under an overpass. After the paving, with thicker asphalt, the sign telling truck drivers the maximum truck height for safe clearance was incorrect. And indeed, an 18-wheeler stuck between the new pavement and the concrete overpass.

The city and the county officials called in their best engineers with their calculators and computers to work as a team to determine what to do. One suggested bringing in cranes to lift the concrete beams enough that the truck could slide out. Another suggested bringing in a blowtorch and disassembling the part of the truck that was stuck.

As they huddled there trying to decide, a twelve-year-old walked up and asked a question. “Why don’t you just let some air out of the tires?” They tried it. The truck's height was lowered, and the truck was driven free.

I

There is a difference between being smart and being wise. Intelligence, an expression of smartness, can be measured through testing. It is a bit controversial, but an Intelligence Quotient, or I.Q., test can supposedly reflect the potential a person has for learning.

Wisdom, on the other hand, involves qualities difficult to measure, such as creativity, discernment, perspective, and sensitivity toward others. William James, often referred to as the father of modern psychology, said, “Wisdom is seeing something in a non-habitual manner,” that is, viewing it with fresh insight in a different way. Richard Carlson said, “Wisdom is the ability to ‘see’ an answer without having to ‘think’ of an answer.” “Why don’t you just let some of the air out of the tires?”

Spend an hour surfing the web on a particular topic, sifting through everything that is there, and you will see the difference between being smart, as in accumulating lots of information, and being wise, as in knowing what information has value.

It seems these days we have a paradox of more and more information, and less and less wisdom. We get so busy trying to be “smart” that we do not get around to being “wise.”

When the writer of James urges Christians to act wisely in their community of faith, he is differentiating between those who know more and those who know better.

James is unimpressed by the worldly kind of wisdom and understanding that people use to argue with one another. The only wisdom that interests James is the wisdom from above, which has nothing to do with having good ideas and everything

to do with living good lives.

II

Jesus' disciples were arguing among themselves, Mark tells in our gospel lesson. They were arguing over who was the greatest in their group. You might say they were operating in a "habitual manner," thinking earthly kingdom, what the world says is clever and smart.

And Jesus uses wisdom from above to turn around their thinking, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." The least become greatest; masters become servants, the first are last, and children show the way. You cannot find that kind of wisdom in a book or on the internet. That kind of wisdom is from above.

Sometimes someone, usually a person who does not know me very well, will say: "You know, I was afraid to tell you something because I did to want to shock you." It is like they think I am naive, that I have a fragile, idealistic view of the world that will be shattered by a stiff dose of reality. That is a common perception about Christians. But it is a strange perception, because we, of all people, should be able to look at things realistically.

Some people criticize Sunday, saying it is withdrawal from the real world. Worship is actually withdrawal from a world that is in many ways is fake. We withdraw from false definitions, false values in order to see a new heaven and a new earth.

Our faith cannot be shattered by what we see and hear in this world, because we do not put our trust in this world alone. People with worldly wisdom shrug their shoulders and say, "Well, it is what it is," and walk away. But believers say, "Yes, that is the way it is," but in God there is promise of redemption and resurrection."

One Sunday after worship, a woman coming out the door said, "I am so glad I came today. I had such a bad week; I had given up hope. I needed to hear what you had to say today."

"I am glad you found some comfort," I said.

"Oh no," she said, "I did not find comfort in what you had to say, but I found what I needed. I found a reason to go on; I found courage."

That kind of wisdom is not naive. It is wisdom that knows that God can make a way out of no way, that God can redeem, even when everything, including our own self, seems lost.

III

This past Wednesday, Freddie Sherrill, former church sexton, shared about his journey from being a homeless addict to a successful graduate of Queens University.

Freddie shared about how in his 20s and 30s he was in and out of jail and

various treatment centers and halfway houses. Until none of the rehabilitation centers in Charlotte would take him again, and he ended up in the only place that the social worker found to take him was the Flynn Christian Fellowship Home of Morganton. He need to find work, and he started doing yard work for Jane and Dub Hord. Then Jane brought him here to church, where Pastor, Steve Eason, hired him.

And Freddie's life turned around. "To that point," he said, "I had spent my life looking for joy as an anecdote for sadness." He looked in the wrong places and became addicted. "I tried to quit over and over," he said, "but I could not as long as my thinking was 'I.' It was not until I came to understand and started thinking "we" that things changed."

Afterward his talk, I asked Freddie, "When you said, you had to start thinking "we" instead of "I?" What did you mean by "we"? "I meant this church," he said, "and Christ in this church. This is the first place I ever felt trusted. And I wanted to honor that trust, and I started caring about myself.

That launched a journey that took him to the local literacy center, then to the GED test, six times until he finally passed, then eight years to earn an associate's degree, and then at the age of 65 a bachelor's degree.

Now Freddie Sherrill has been sober for 29 years, and he has a college degree. "My story," Freddie says, "transcends human understanding, culture and race. It is a story of God's love, mercy and grace."

Conclusion

James says there is a big distinction between the divine wisdom that comes "from above" and the human wisdom that is "earthly." We work toward human-inspired wisdom, what the world says is clever or smart. But James says such earthy wisdom is unspiritual, motivated by envy and selfish ambition.

Divinely-inspired wisdom, on the other hand, is pure. It is known through its spread of peace, its gentle and yielding spirit, and its good fruits and merciful nature. That is wisdom from above.

And you do not acquire this kind of wisdom through anything you do. It is beyond human achievement. You simply receive it as gift. A gift of God's love, mercy and grace, says Freddie Sherrill. Amen.