

“Everyday Wisdom”
James 3:13 - 4:8
Rev. Andrew Connors
Proper 20
September 19, 2021

The book of James seems so full of contradictions. “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom” James writes and then goes on to call his listeners murderers and adulterers. The writer calls his own people sinners and double-minded then later pleads with those same people not to judge anyone. Maybe this is why Martin Luther called this book an “epistle of straw” and worked hard to remove it from the Bible altogether. Theologian Mark Douglas, in noting these frustrations points out that the temptation is either to dismiss James altogether (like Martin Luther), or to pull from the book superficial bits of one liners that don’t deal with the full argument of the text.¹

Honestly, I would have been satisfied with superficial one liners which I could have easily pulled from the very first verse in this section. “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” It’s a perfect phrase to put on your bathroom mirror. Leave out the harsher language as the lectionary has mostly done today. Leave out the parts condemning selfish ambition, disorder, wickedness, partiality, hypocrisy. Leave out the judgmental sounding pieces, the claims of listeners being enemies of God, and talk of the devil. It would have been easier to stay with the superficial than to muddle our way through all that mess.

Mark Douglas says that the key to James is recognizing that it’s not really an epistle - that is, a letter - in the way that the other letters of the New Testament are epistles. It’s a book of wisdom, the only such book in the New Testament. “[James’ version] becoming wise,” according to theologian Douglas “means learning how to think carefully and act virtuously in complex situations where one is tempted to think simplistically and act recklessly”.² Which is the hardest and perhaps most relevant discussion that we need to be having in the church right now.

How do we love our neighbors when some aren’t taking the vaccine - the one thing that could improve the outcomes for us all. How do we engage climate change deniers in a way that doesn’t make working together even more impossible than it already is. Or more personally, how do I continue to give my energy and efforts toward a vision of the world I want to see when it doesn’t seem to produce short term results?

¹ Mark Douglas, “Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2009, p.62.

² Ibid, p. 62.

Or how do you engage that one relative who doesn't recognize the fullness of who you are, or has been selfish, mean, and hurtful in relationship to you?

I want to find that wisdom that James is interested in. I want to be able to think carefully and act virtuously in every part of my life. But James doesn't spoon feed us any easy answers. It just warns us that there are lots of ways of being, ways of living that try to pass for wisdom, that are actually pretty bankrupt. We are masters of our own self-deception, choosing things labeled wise that are actually pretty terrible for ourselves and each other.

This is actually the root of most of our troubles, according to James. Not some cosmic evil in the world - that battle has already been settled. God has won! Rather "the conflicts we face," in the words of theologian Douglas "are those that come from within us. . .the true battle," he writes, "is for self-awareness, self-control, and enough self-mastery to know that we ought not take on the task of trying to be masters of our own fates."³

Unfortunately, self awareness is a mirage, as the title of David Brooks' most recent column points out. "One of the most unsettling findings of modern psychology," Brooks writes, "is that we often don't know why we do what we do."⁴ Introspection, the experts have concluded, is nearly impossible because human beings are such masters at concocting stories to justify decisions we've already made. Nicholas Epley, the author of *Mindwise*, put it like this to David Brooks: "Spending two decades studying the mind reading really highlighted the importance of humility in life. . .both recognizing that we don't have privileged access to our minds, so tone down your self-confidence, and we also don't know other people as well as we think we do."⁵

I found that totally refreshing at a time where large parts of the country seem to have gone ahead and decided the motivations that drive other people. We all make judgments about the motivations of others tens if not hundreds of times a day. I know I do. This person cut me off in traffic because they're a jerk. That person didn't return my call because they don't like me. That other person avoided me because they're upset or they can't handle conflict or whatever. Story after story after story that we create about others when the reality, restating Epley is that "we don't know other people as well as we think we do."

Summarizing Epley's work, Brooks concludes that we can't really know ourselves by looking inward as much as we can learn by closely observing our behavior - the way we act in the world. The way we act with each other. "We can attain true wisdom and pretty good self-awareness," Brooks summarizes, "by looking at behavior and reality in the face to create more accurate narratives."⁶ More accurate narratives.

³ Ibid, p. 88.

⁴David Brooks, "Is Self Awareness a Mirage?" *The New York Times*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/16/opinion/psychology-consciousness-behavior.html>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ ibid.

James says we can obtain that true wisdom by keeping apart from the world which makes complete sense for any community like the one he addressed that is embattled, that is surrounded by a larger world that is hostile to it. But it makes less sense for communities like ours that are struggling to live out our faith in pluralistic societies that aren't so much hostile to our beliefs and practices as they are disinterested in them. We don't need to isolate ourselves from the world as much as we need to learn how to engage it without losing the virtues that are at the root of our faith. The virtues that God is trying to instill in us as individuals and as a community as a holy gift - an offering to us that we can offer to each other and to the world.

And that's where I think James' pragmatism might serve us well. According to James' version of wisdom, "one becomes wise," theologian Douglas says, "by learning to integrate one's thoughts, will, and actions to one's context in faithful ways."⁷ When we find that sweet spot, according to James, we stay pure in our "peaceableness, gentleness, willingness to yield, merciful disposition and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." (3:16) Which begs questions like, What do you do to maintain your own peacefulness in a world that thrives on conflict? How do you maintain gentleness as a virtue in a culture that prizes the toxic masculinity of grabbing and taking? How do you practice a give and take mentality with each other - abiding with each other - in a world that raises us to compete with each at a very early age? How do we value the good fruits of loving our neighbors when we all know what is prized in our culture is looking out for yourself chasing after the acquisition of money and things?

There is no one right answer to those questions. Some find those virtues nurtured through study. Others through meditation, mindfulness, yoga and its focus on breathing, or other spiritual practice. Others through daily prayer. Still others through conversations, where insights are born and disciplines discovered together. Like James, we don't prescribe single strategies; we measure them by their outcomes. What disciplines that you practice increase in you a sense of peacefulness? Gentleness? Mutuality and openness?

Perhaps all this talk of peacefulness and gentleness sounds a little weak to some of you. Or perhaps it sounds disingenuous a day after some of you probably saw me with BUILD agitating our Mayor in a respectful but direct kind of way. Or perhaps it sounds nice to practice in community but not so helpful in the rough and tumble world in which we find ourselves today. Lots of people get concerned when they hear Christians reduce the practice of our faith to a set of personal virtues that end up reducing our capacity to challenge the powers that be. For example, directly challenging President Biden's inaugural appeal that this is the time to heal in America, Kristin Kobes Du Mez, author of *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, writes "If this healing is to take place, the militancy at the heart of

⁷ Douglas, 62, 64.

conservative white evangelicalism must be confronted.”⁸ Why should we prize peacefulness and gentleness and a merciful disposition in a time that demands we be ready for confrontation?

I’m not sure I know. What I know about myself is that the more I have deepened my capacity for peacefulness, the more I’ve been able to confront powers that be - head to head - in a clear-minded kind of way. The more I’ve learned to practice gentleness in a world marked by brutality, the more I’ve been able to see and learn the powerful life stories of those who have gone overlooked. The more I’ve extended mercy to others and the more I’ve experienced it for myself the more I’ve realized how our own judging, critical voice might be at the root of more of our wounds than we realize. The virtues expressed by James do not prevent us from challenging forces and powers that need to be held to account. They give us a greater inner capacity to do exactly that.

Like theologian Mark Douglas wrote, “becoming wise means learning how to think carefully and act virtuously in complex situations where one is tempted to think simplistically and act recklessly. . .one becomes wise by learning to integrate one’s thoughts, will, and actions to one’s context in faithful ways.” Recognizing with the book of James that yes the spiritual life includes the rejection of wisdom that is not from God by embracing the wisdom that is given by God. All the while avoiding those superficial kinds of answers to questions that demand the fullness of our being - heart, mind, body, and soul. Henri Nouwen, in his book on spiritual direction, warns us against the same especially when times are difficult. “Be careful,” he writes, “when life’s questions swirl around you in times of pain. Beware of easy answers or guarantees. Seek the companionship of others who will befriend you and listen as you live the questions of your life.”⁹

Imagine Nouwen’s focus on companionship applied to the definition of our church. Imagine if, instead of a building, or a rigid set of beliefs, or a club of like minded people, our church was defined as the place where I seek the companionship of others who will befriend me and listen to me as I live the questions of my life. That’s the wisdom so many are seeking, hungering for, hoping for. It’s the wisdom that James says God is eager to give to us. Not an easy wisdom. But a wisdom that is revealed to you and me in the every day challenges of living. May more of us discover it here and know God’s love for us and for our world.

⁸ Kristin Kobes Du Mex, *Jesus and John Wayne*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation), 2020, xix.

⁹ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*, (New York: HarperOne), 2006, 7.