

Wisdom: From Above and From the Dust

1 Corinthians 15:40-49; James 3:13-18

This morning we read from James the conclusion of what he began to say last week about how dangerous it can get when the thoughts we hold in our fallen and sinful hearts make their way past our tongues and out into the world where, for better or worse, they can shape the hearts of others and set events rolling in a direction toward consequences that no mere human can tame or heal. And James brought us all the way back to the Garden in Genesis where a demonic Serpent let loose ideas that set what James called “...*the wheel of Genesis...the whole course of life aflame*”.

A few spoken words from the Serpent and, for Adam and Eve, God was no longer God, the truth was no longer true. The text tells us that the Serpent was “*crafty*”, clever which our ancestors mistook for wisdom. So James warns his readers and us this morning to compare sweet, fine sounding words with the way of life of the speaker, he writes, “*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by his good way of life his works in the meekness of wisdom?*”

In other words, eloquence and personal appeal need to be accompanied by a way of life that adds up, that unfolds toward an outcome that makes sense and obeys what God commands and keeps the promises we make to God and to each other. James requires of teachers like me that our lives “*show...works*”, things that get accomplished “*in the meekness of wisdom*”. In other words, it’s not just the outcome, the mastery a person shows over circumstances, but the outlook, what does this person serve, toward whom does this person’s life point. And the key to that is the heart.

Both Jeremiah and Jesus said so last week and so did James today, he wrote, “*But if you have bitter jealousy and strife in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.*” The word here for jealousy can cut both ways. In a good sense, it means “zeal”. Eight times in the New Testament, this word “zeal” is spoken of as intense loyalty and affection for God and other Christians. And eight times it is used how James uses it here, “*bitter jealousy*”, people being overcome by what they think and what they want to the point where it becomes bitter, self-serving, divisive.

We spent some time developing the notion last week that the Fall has bent our hearts to the point where we can be truly wrong and still work up quite a sense of outrage about it. And, this week, paired with “*bitter jealousy*”, this passion to be right, James adds the word “*strife*” which is just as intense as jealousy, but a lot more calculated. Strife is what happens when bitter jealousy finds a strategy. Phrases get turned in order to injure. Events get manipulated so that so that what my heart wants...happens, God’s commands, God’s promises, sacred due process notwithstanding.

“This is not,” James says, *“wisdom come down from above but is earthly, natural, demonic.”* And with these words James brings us back again to our father Adam in the garden. Much is made in Genesis 2 of the fact that God fashioned humanity out of the dust, the ground. Not to say that dirt is the primary ingredient from which we’re made so much as to emphasize that we are physical, made of organic stuff, like all the other creatures God made. And yet we are different.

In Genesis it says that the *“breath of God”* or *“the Spirit of God”* made each of us a *“living soul”*. Which means that like God, we have souls, we think and feel and decide and devote ourselves to the point of sacrifice to what is right and good. But when we fell, the dust became for us a ceiling as well as the floor on which we stand. We are made of physical stuff and these bodies will die and turn back into the stuff because we are estranged from the God who breathed us into something more.

So we are *“earthly”*, James tells us. We are *“natural”*, he goes on. The word natural in the Greek is actually *“soulish”*. We still have souls, but our souls are now a much smaller room since God no longer lives there. We now think and feel and decide and devote ourselves to things unguided by the goodness and wisdom and purity and love that lived within us before our ancestors banished God from the souls he gave us. Our souls are small and dark without him.

Finally, James tells us that our own wisdom without God is *“demonic”*. The point being that God made us small from the get-go. We are *“earthly”*, made from physical stuff and without God we go back to being stuff, “Dust to dust, ashes to ashes”. We are *“soulish”*. We have wonderful capacities, but without God none of it adds up to anything good. And finally, we are *“demonic”*.

The Serpent promised us that defying God and making our own rules would buy us freedom. In fact, we became slaves to our own wants and needs and sins and mistakes. And guess who is cheerfully manipulating it all. An army of spirits as deceitful and hateful and pitiless as the Serpent himself.

Without God in our corner, unless we love and lean on and trust in God. We can’t do better than this. But the good news, James tells us, is that Jesus has put another kind of wisdom into play. Not from this earth, not generated by our souls, not subject to demonic deceit and wisdom.

He writes, *“The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of peace is sown in peace by those who make peace.”* This is the wisdom that will raise us from the dust, free us from our dark and

tiny souls, and bind us to a Spirit that no demon can or will dare to contradict. It is ours right now if we reach for it and allow God to weave it into us. But more on that after Mother's Day.