

Sermon – September 19, 2021

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen

There are innumerable situations in life when we say – on the hand...and then, on the other hand? Usually, those situations give us reason to pause and choose a position and then defend it. Many of the instances are not terribly serious, but they well could be.

And for sure, you can't be on the fence. You have to choose one hand or the other. No equivocating here.

As I've experienced those situations, most often they are not of great significance. Sometimes they can be funny and lighthearted.

And as I read our texts for today, I was struck that in a very real way we are dealing with a classic on-the-one-hand-and-on-the-other-hand situation as we deal with all three of our texts.

Jeremiah, on the one hand is suffering from intense opposition and persecution. He is suffering, even though he is proclaiming God's word to God's people. On the other hand, he continues to trust in God in the midst of all his suffering.

James, on the one hand, wants his hearers to understand what the wisdom of God is all about. On the other hand, he is more than aware of what earthly wisdom is all about and the harm that it can produce.

Jesus, on the one hand, is telling his disciples what must happen in the not-too-distant future. And on the other hand, must continue to teach them lessons that escape their ability to comprehend.

And we should make no mistake about it – these situations are very serious and should be taken seriously by us all today.

A major theme in our texts today is the wisdom of God in opposition to the wisdom that is so often not wisdom, but our own thoughts and beliefs that we regard as wisdom.

Wisdom from above is clearly distinct from wisdom that is earthly. The author of James intends that contrast to be raw and stark. The prohibition reads something like "don't tell lies against the truth." "Earthly," "unspiritual," and demonic wisdom is characterized with words such as: bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, boasting, alternative facts, disorder and every foul practice.

And such a messy situation is neither unusual nor unfamiliar. And it stands in direct contrast to wisdom from above, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, and open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, and without uncertainty or insincerity. As James lays out this contrast, it would do each of us good to imagine which is more appealing and imagine which might more resemble our daily wander through life.

As we move from James to our gospel text, we find this same wisdom amid the disciples quarreling and we hear Jesus placing a child among his squabbling disciples and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

It may be hard for us to imagine such harsh words from Jesus as he's holding a child. But let's think about this from 1st C. perspective. Children were loved and cared for but not socially esteemed, so to tell the disciples that it is a child who will be the greatest in God's kingdom is indeed harsh.

The disciples became lost in the wisdom of the world as they wondered among themselves who was the greatest. I picture each of them seeing themselves in 1st place on the podium. Jesus brings them down to earth with wisdom from above. Jesus' words amount to a slap in the face to each of the disciples.

So, in a sense, all these references regarding heavenly wisdom v. earthly wisdom may well be a slap in the face to us as well – not so much that it stings but it reminds us of where and upon whom we should look for wisdom.

Many folks today remind me of "bobble head" figures. Their heads are shaking a great deal of the time as they try their best to constantly wade through the pandemic, life in general and the craziness that has seeped into the heart of politics on every level.

The "bobble-headedness" would be comical, if it weren't simply sad.

It is difficult to sort out fact from fiction, fact from politics, fact from misinformation.

I believe it is safe to say that what we are dealing with in all areas of our life presently needs to have a good dose of wisdom from above injected into the mix. Just for starters.

Over the last several decades we have seen poll after poll conclude that there are fewer and fewer people in our nation professing to be Christian or any other major religion of the world.

I believe it's correct to say that non-religious folk have no notion of wisdom from above – wisdom of God. For them there is only earthly wisdom which is becoming more and more defined as "what I think and believe about any given subject or topic at any given time."

For the remainder of us who acknowledge and appreciate the fact that heavenly wisdom is available to us through a life in Christ's midst, we are charged with discerning "heavenly wisdom" from "earthly wisdom." And the living out of all that God's wisdom assures us as we deal our best with the situations at hand.

If you are beginning to think that there is a great dichotomy, a great divide between wisdom from above and earthly wisdom, I believe you are on the right track.

In a true sense this Christian life we endeavor to live trusting and resting on wisdom from above is an alternative to the life many others lead today.

A life lived trusting God's wisdom is a totally different experience than believing we alone hold all the kernels of wisdom that exists. "Who among us is the greatest" was the subject of discussion between the disciples in our gospel text.

And, of course, Jesus would have none of it. Wisdom from above set them straight. It is about entering God's kingdom as a child – one who is taught and led by God, one who is made righteous and whole by God, one who has access to heavenly wisdom. And this heavenly wisdom is to be appreciated and lived our routinely and yes, perhaps most of all at times such as we are experiencing right now.

On the one hand, we live in tumultuous times, times that are disruptive and uncertain, times when divisions are widening, times when we feel new degrees of stress and frustration as many, many voices vie for our attention; when voices spout earthly wisdom and would have us believe they are sure, certain and true words for all to live by.

And on the other hand, we have God's Spirit within us proclaiming wisdom from above – wisdom that is ageless, wisdom that doesn't change by the winds and whims of us human beings. God's wisdom is the rock-solid foundation that we build our lives upon now and always.

Our Psalm today, Psalm 54, contains a verse that we could perhaps take with us and focus on: "But surely, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life."

Thanks be to God. Amen