

Serve Well
Mark 9:30-37 / James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Colebrook Congregational Church
Ordinary 25 / September 20, 2015

This week's secondary selection comes from my favorite epistle, The Letter of James. The majority of the selection is wisdom literature, like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. To James, there are two types of wisdom, and like those held up in the Old Testament, ideal wisdom is associated with practical good behavior and not speculative thought like most Greeks at the time considered to be good wisdom.

While James is describing what bad wisdom looks like and where it comes from, I got caught up on verse 14. "...If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth." [pause] That would require a lot of self-awareness, to recognize that your actions are envious and selfish quickly enough to not be boastful. And would you even care at that point? It seems like he is trying to minimize the damage of negative actions, maybe? Any way, wisdom gained from such behavior is not divine, but devilish, and that wickedness should be avoided. James warns us where that could lead.

On the other hand, divine wisdom has all the good virtues, being merciful, gentle, without hypocrisy or partiality. James' concluding proverb has a translation issue, though. The Greek article, "for" can also be translated as "by." I think that alternate translation is better. "...A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." Following James' advice, consider your hearts and what motivates it, and see if you are a peacemaker.

The Gospel selection today also has some advice.

From last Sunday to this Sunday, we skip a good chunk. Chapter nine started with the Transfiguration, which happens after last week's selection, and it also skips a healing. This week's selection is the beginning of a larger section going into chapter ten that is full of lessons on being a disciple.

Now Mark is always rushing forward, always in motion. So much so, that Jesus is depicted as teaching the Disciples on the move this time, on the road

between Galilee and Capernaum. As usual, the Disciples didn't quite understand Jesus. Last week, it is shown that the Disciples only understood that Jesus is the Messiah, not the part where Jesus foretells His suffering and death. Even though Isaiah, the prophet that foretold the coming of the Messiah, described the Messiah as a Suffering Servant, saving the people though He is a servant who endures pain and death, doing so for their sake.

Once they reach Capernaum, which back south near Bethsaida on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus stops and wants to know what the Disciples were arguing about on the road. He surely knew already, He probably heard them, and it didn't matter that they didn't tell Him. The reason they were arguing amongst themselves would make our eyes roll today, but in antiquity, it was very important within social groups. It mattered who was the so-called greatest back then. It gave someone their identity and ego, made them feel special about themselves. Such arguments today leads only to sighs and head shaking.

The next verse is paralleled in the other Gospels, but each put their own little spin on it. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Mark's version of it tells us that humble service to the community is to be considered the norm, not the distinguishing characteristic.

Jesus then ends with a charge to include youth in their community. Back then, there was a lot of ageism. Societies valued age and therefore wisdom, with youth being looked down upon. Jesus wants an end to that, to see the value of even the children in the community, demanding their inclusion!

Jesus is taking accepted social constructs and turning them on their heads!

The main focus of this selection is on the leadership part. Jesus is upsetting the standard worldview here. Leaders were supposed to be separate, above those they led. Look at the Pharaohs of Egypt, or the Emperors of Rome, or Alexander the Great later in his life when his plans fell apart.

Jesus teaches us that greatness requires service. To be first, you must be last. To lead, you must serve all. History has shown us that many of the greatest

leaders were also those who served those he or she led. Compare the early great French monarch, Charlemagne, who led his soldiers from the front and dressed in a way to fit in with anyone in the streets, to Louis XVI, who was so disconnected from his people that he and Marie Antoinette were disposed of by an uprising. Then there were two Queens of England named Elizabeth. The first, when the Spanish Armada was threatening invasion, and the English militia formed at Tilbury to meet them, Queen Elizabeth joined them. She gave her most famous speech, telling them, as they could hear the naval battle off shore, that she will join them on the front lines, to live or die among them. And then the Queen Mother Elizabeth, while Buckingham was being bombed around her, she decided to learn how to shoot, just in case the Nazis landed, so she too could fight them. On our side of the Pond, one of my favorite persons from history was Ulysses S. Grant. He made sure his troops had everything they needed to survive, and he fought alongside them on the front lines. Unlike his predecessors, he stayed with his troops, instead of leading from Washington. When he did go to Washington, there are many stories of him being mistaken as a private because of his simple uniform.

This type of leader is a common archetype in the movies. The heroic leader enduring the same conditions as those led endure. The leader being last one to leave, making sure everyone else is safely away. The leader who doesn't say, "Go there," but "Follow me!"

That reminded me of Disney movie about the Boy Scouts called, "Follow Me, Boys!" It starred Fred MacMurray, the dad from My Three Sons, a man new to a town who dreamed of becoming a hot shot lawyer. He instead volunteers to be the Scoutmaster of the newly formed Boy Scout Troop. Even though he had other plans, he found himself finding greater fulfillment in serving the towns' boys, and helping them to mature into good men, especially the former town troublemaker. The movie follows him as spends 20 years serving the community and three generations of scouts, ending with the entire town throwing him a celebration of appreciation for all that he had done.

If Jesus came here today and said the same thing, and wanted to select that person according to this standard, would we even know who that person is?

It definitely will not be someone with a political title, nor a chairman of such & such, nor a president of this or that, nor a proprietor, nor a scoutmaster, nor a pastor. It would have to be someone who is probably unknown to us. A person living without fanfare, living by good wisdom, living quietly by the tenets of their faith. To Jesus, greatness is achieved by service, not the boasts of pomp and heraldry, nor wealth or earthly power. But by service to others.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

[PAUSE]

Creator God, you call us to love and serve You with body, mind, and spirit through loving your creation and our sisters and brothers. Open our hearts in compassion and receive our thanksgivings and petitions on behalf of our church, our community, and the world.

We thank You for Your blessings, and for the lessons You teach us. We thank You for those You have sent to help us in our daily lives. And we thank You for the opportunities to serve You through serving others, seeing to their needs.

We know we are not perfect, so we pray for the forgiveness of our missteps. We pray for your guidance to live our lives in more loving ways.

We lift up the prayers of our hearts for those who are burdened, by troubles of mind, body, or spirit. We pray for their unburdening, we pray for their caregivers, and we pray that you move us to serve in any way our gifts allow. We pray for those who are lost, so that they may find guidance. We pray for those who protect us, please keep them safe as they have kept us safe. And we pray that you help us to be instruments of your divine love.

We are reminded of all in world who need our prayers. We pray for the refugees around the world, especially from Syria and North Africa, please see them to safer places, and we give thanks to those who provide them shelter. We pray for those who are enduring drought, famine, and a lack of basic necessities. We pray for the oppressed. We pray for all to have a safe place.

We especially pray for:

Hear our prayers, both spoken and unspoken, the prayers of our hearts. And free us from the grip of distractions, that we may be of service to others in your name in our lives. Amen

James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a

3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

3:14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 3:15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 3:16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

3:17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 3:18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

4:1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 4:2 You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. 4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

4:7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 4:8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Mark 9:30-37

9:30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 9:31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." 9:32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

9:33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 9:34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 9:35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 9:36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 9:37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."