

“The Nature of Wisdom and How to Acquire It”

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

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A few years ago, before Ian had finished his PhD, but after Ali had started graduate work, Ian said, “You know, when we finish, we’ll be Dr., Dr., Dr., and Mom.” Overhearing this, Dana’s father replied, “Yea, and who will be the boss?” Ian’s shoulders slumped, as he said, “Mom.”

Education isn’t everything. We have all known people with many degrees who didn’t have any common sense, though being uneducated isn’t much of a virtue either. I have told some of you about a letter John Wesley received, saying God could do without his book learning.

Wesley replied, saying the Lord didn’t need that man’s ignorance either!

Education is a good thing, it just isn’t everything, and there are different types of learning – book learning and practical knowledge. There are different types of intelligence – informational, emotional, and relational. And there are different ways to learn - some of us are visual, some are auditory, and some kinetic, we have to be moving.

And some people don’t seem to learn at all, like Jesus’ disciples... In today’s reading, Jesus predicts his suffering and death a second time whereupon his disciples begin a debate about who is the greatest among them. Jesus talks about laying down his life and they want to know who will get a promotion! Last week I compared them to the Marx Brothers and Peter to Barney Fife, but this may have been giving them too much credit. One scholar has noted that the disciples are so dense that light bends around them. We know people like this.

But not only are there different types and levels of intelligence, there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom, possessing information and knowing what to do with it. The latter is a nobler attribute, and it is the concern of our reading from James. “Who is wise and understanding among you?” James asks, and then he goes on to talk about what true wisdom, wisdom from above, looks like. It’s worth our time to ponder the nature of such wisdom and how we might acquire it.

James says wisdom is revealed not just in what we think or say but in what we do, how we live. With James it always comes back to action. If we have bitter envy and selfish ambition in our hearts, we will act in ways that create disorder and evil of every kind, and thus demonstrate a lack of wisdom. But if we are wise, we will be pure, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. We will pursue peace with others and avoid disputes.

This seems pretty clear, if not very common - those who are wise learn how to live well with others - but how do we get there? How do we choose to act wisely when we are surrounded by foolishness? In part, we don't, it is a gift. James calls this "wisdom from above," as opposed to "earthly, unspiritual" wisdom. But why would God only give this to some? God offers wisdom to all, but only some are willing to receive it, those who realize their limits and thus their need for help.

One verse left out by the lectionary editors gets to the heart of James' argument. "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6)." It is a quote of Proverbs 3:34. Humility is the key. It is the opposite of selfish ambition, but it is also the byproduct of clear thinking, in a way, simply being in touch with reality. Socrates said that the only true wisdom is knowing you know nothing. Wise people know their limits. Humble people are willing to yield to others and pursue peace because they realize they are not always right.

Confident and insightful though he was, Ben Franklin revealed this kind of humility on certain occasions. Speaking at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, he said this. "I confess that there are several parts of this constitution which I do not at present approve, but I am not sure I shall never approve them. For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information, or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise."

Even after having lived long, Franklin was 81 at this time, and having been obliged by better information or fuller consideration, it still requires a measure of humility to acknowledge having been wrong. Plenty of people today, especially those in public life, seem incapable of doing so, as if ever acknowledging a wrong is a sign of weakness. On

the contrary, as Ben Franklin demonstrated, it is a sign of strength and wisdom, common sense really, because we are all wrong about some things, so we all need to leave room for new understanding.

The question is, “How do we do this? How do we develop humility?” James suggests we draw near to God, and God will draw near to us. Proverbs 9:10 says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, “fear” meaning “awe” here. In the presence of the Holy we are moved to awe because we realize we are not holy, we realize our creatureliness. Seeing God, we understand who we are not.

It's a bit like an experience I had in my competitive running years. I had a bottom-rung sponsorship with Etonic for a while and then with Puma. And I won some nice races and ran in a couple cross country national championships. But I never really developed an inflated ego about running because I trained with a number of top-rung athletes, the six and seven figure kind who ran in the Olympics and World Championships and set national and world records. I was reminded on a daily basis of how good I was not. It gave me a sense of perspective.

When we draw near to God, we have an experience like this, only multiplied by infinity! The Holiness of God reminds us not only of how good we are not, but how little we know of the cosmos and all the creatures in it.

We might think of Job. After he lets out all his anger on God - appropriately we should add, he has suffered mightily, for no good reason – God basically says, “And where were you when I was creating the world?” In other words, “How could you have any idea what is going on?” The answer is – he can't. “I have uttered what I did not understand,” Job says, “things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42:3-6).”

Being in the presence of God is humbling, and thus those who exhibit no humility at all, only ego, pride, and arrogance, haven't spent much, if any, time with God, no matter what they claim.

But there is another way in which drawing near to God moves us in the direction of humility and thus wisdom. We realize we are not

holy, and yet God embraces us in love anyway. God draws near to us, James says, extending grace. This too is humbling.

Have we ever received an honor or distinction we didn't think we deserved? How did that make us feel? Embarrassed, grateful, perhaps, but certainly humbled. Such an experience has a tendency to motivate us to become the kind of person who does deserve that honor. So it goes with the gracious acceptance we feel in the presence of God, except again multiplied by infinity. Embraced as beloved children, we are inspired to be who we really are.

We might think of Isaiah. When he finds himself in the presence of God, he says, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the Sovereign One, the Lord of hosts!" He feels unworthy to be in God's presence, but God's messenger cleanses the prophet with burning coal and speaks a word of forgiveness. Having received such unimaginable grace, when God asks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah replies, "Here am I; send me!" Drawing near to God humbles him and inspires him to accept his calling; humility leads to wise action.

All of this having been said, wisdom is still difficult to define. We know it when we see it, and we know when it is missing, but no single definition seems to capture what it is. Perhaps that is OK, as long as we recognize it, and seek it in ourselves and from others, and most of all, from God.

There are people we consider to be wise, people we go to when we need guidance. A counselor or teacher, a parent or grandparent, a minister or some other professional... often just someone whose judgment we trust, someone who will listen, someone who may not have all the answers but who will help us find a way forward. No matter how we define "wisdom," these people embody it for us.

Growing up, my grandparents filled this role for me and later my youth minister followed in their footsteps. And in every community where I have served as a minister for forty-two years, I have been fortunate to have people to go to for guidance, women and men, clergy and laity, people worthy of my trust.

No human being has all the answers. One of my favorite clinical books is entitled *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!* It is not a literal invitation to commit murder. It's a psychotherapist's use of an old image to say that if anyone claims to have all the answers for your life – a shaman, witch, minister, rabbi, Buddha, or psychotherapist, do not listen to them. No one has all the answers.

So, while some people have wisdom and thus the ability to help us, we have to find our own answers, but we do so in the context of grace, or we might say, with God's help too. For when we draw near to God, God draws nears us, not just humbling us and extending grace, but offering wisdom we cannot find on our own.