

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

James 3:13-18

Wisdom from Above and for the Neighbor

Faith without deeds is dead. James made that clear to us last week. Now he would drive home a similar point: wisdom without deeds is dead. God does not gift us with wisdom that we might know a lot, but that we might gladly serve our neighbor. Wisdom is not information collected, but insight practiced. Just as law and gospel have been revealed to be applied, not theorized, so also wisdom is given to be applied for the benefit of those we encounter.

Benjamin Franklin once said, "Tim was so learned, that he could name a horse in nine languages. So ignorant that he bought a cow to ride on." Many of you know such people. They can remember everything they've ever read in a book, but common sense eludes them. The theoretical is of little use if it is not practical. For instance, it is well and good to know how the combustible engine works. It is another thing to drive a car. When I'm in the passenger seat, I'd rather have the one who knows how to drive a car next to me than the one who know how the combustible engine works. Ideally, the two are combined, but the theory is no use if not put into practice.

James reminds us that wisdom is knowledge put to use for our neighbor. James tells us that true wisdom brings humility. Perhaps that is the first sign to warn us when we are seeking false wisdom, or when we are turning wisdom into the knowledge that is called power. Are we humbled in our learning, both by our appreciation for the greatness of Him who lies behind all truth and by our recognition of the responsibility that learning brings, that is, our duty to love and serve our neighbor with what has been taught us. If our learning is not bringing humility, we must question our motives, our methods, and our goals. Why are we learning? How are we learning? What are we doing with our learning?

In the Holy Gospel today, Jesus, Wisdom Himself, speaks of cross and suffering. At the same time, the disciples debate glory and greatness. As Christ becomes the least of these to save, the disciples long to become the greatest of these to rule. And we cannot be too tough on the disciples, because how often haven't we sought to use what is ours for our own increase, and not for the increase of our neighbor and Christ. Jesus knew what the disciples were discussing, and so He asked them, "*What were you arguing about on the road?*" They were silent. Literally, they were speechless. As Christ speaks of cross they are ashamed to admit they have spoken of personal glory. But Jesus wants the lesson learned, and so He tells them, "*If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.*"

And Christ practiced what He preached. He did become the servant of all, confounding the wisdom of the world by the foolishness of His cross, using what was His for our benefit. St. Paul says it well, "*Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men*" (1 Corinthians 1:20-25).

Christ is the power and wisdom of God, and He shows that in what appears to be weakness and foolishness. He is killed to conquer. He is afflicted to heal. He is troubled to

comfort. He is not ashamed in shame as He finds in His cross His greatest glory. The wisdom that James commends to us is seen nowhere more clearly than in Wisdom who came down from heaven to save. *“But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”*

Albert Einstein was a brilliant man, no one can deny that, but even Einstein was not smart enough to prevent his knowledge from being turned into destruction. When Einstein discovered how to split an atom, he hoped that his discovery would bring efficient energy to the world to benefit his neighbor. But others saw in Einstein’s wisdom knowledge to be harnessed to do harm, and thus the atom bomb came into existence. The problem was not so much Einstein’s discovery but the motivation behind the use of it, and the methods employed for doing so. What Einstein meant to improve life actually made us more efficient in taking it.

In addition to giving us revealed truth in His Word, God has also blessed us with marvelous minds for discovering the many wonders of His creation. Such an ability is a blessing. But with knowledge comes responsibility. Wisdom without prudence is reckless folly. Call to mind the horrors that the same scientific methods that have given us medical miracles and beneficial technologies have also brought us when not exercised ethically. Science-fiction authors and futurists have warned for centuries of the dangers of a scientific society that is not also a moral one. And how many Frankensteins aren’t on our horizon if much of what is debated today should come to pass. Wisdom is meant for our neighbor, and not merely for our own self-seeking zeal. Wisdom divorced of a love for one another can only bring disorder and every evil practice.

If this is true of natural knowledge, how much more ought it be true in the church and with regard to the mysteries God has revealed to us in Christ and His Word? Where it is not the case, a congregation can only suffer, and not for the gospel, but for the foolishness of its members. Where our gifts are seen as a reason we should be served and not a reason we should serve no good can come. Salvation came through the humility of the wise, and salvation is lived through the same. Thus, *“peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”*

Christ took a child in His arms and had him stand among the disciples. Find me in this child, serve me in this child, love me in this child, He says in essence. And, in finding, serving, and loving me thus, you will find, serve, and love the Father. If you are wise, you will be the most foolish of all, for you will see the greatest in the least, glory in crosses and life in death.

What has God called you to do? Do it for your neighbor. What has God gifted you to know? Know it for your neighbor. What has God granted you to be? Be it for your neighbor. What has God blessed you to have? Have it for your neighbor. That is true wisdom, that is true greatness, that is real glory, because that is what Christ has done for us, and that is what Christ through faith would now do through us. Rejoice that the greatest of heaven became the least of the earth to redeem you. Give thanks that the glory of heaven paled in beauty to the shame of the cross in the eyes of Jesus, the power and wisdom of God, as love turned thorns into a crown and wounds into trophies. *“But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”* That is Wisdom from above and for the neighbor. That is our wisdom in Christ. Amen.