

Faith and Works, Wrapped in Wisdom
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Texts: Proverbs 1:20-33, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8

OK, I admit it. Last week I ended where I might have begun.

I had engaged us all in a two-week consideration of our responsibilities to the poor. Then I closed with a verse from the Letter of James in the New Testament. It read:

What good is it my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Many would have started a sermon with those verses rather than ending there. They have launched theological debates that have rocked the church over the centuries. Some would argue they deal with nothing short of our salvation in the eyes of God.

Congregations and even denominations have split over smaller matters. Theologians and academics, in their search for truth, have broken down James' claim. They've compared it to the gospels and the epistles. Doctrine and dogma alike have sprung from the finer points of these debates.

Is faith all-sufficient for our salvation? If so, what is the role of works? Where does the grace of Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection, fit in? Is that grace so cheap that we can rely on it for our salvation and then do what we want with our lives? Or is it so costly that our only response can be to submit every day of our lives in the service of the God who came in Christ?

Do you get a sense of the magnitude of what's at stake with those few verses from James?

So even though James is a little, often-forgotten letter tucked in back of the New Testament, it raises some big questions. This morning, we can revisit that little book and see what more James had to say.

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First, a little context.

As with so many parts of the Bible, we can't say for certain who the "James" of this letter was. Tradition holds it was James, the brother of Jesus. He became the leader of movement in Jerusalem after Christ's death and, himself, died the death of a martyr at the hands of the Roman government. Alternative theories hold that the letter is written in the memory of that James.

Either way, the writer knew Jewish law. He – yes, probably a he - writes with knowledge of the role of Wisdom in the Old Covenant that shaped the lives of the ancient Hebrews. We heard the voice of lady Wisdom in our reading from Proverbs this morning.

The letter presupposes an actual audience, most likely a formed community of early Christians with elders and other leaders. Clues suggest it was a poor community, struggling in the shadows of Jerusalem's more affluent circles.

The letter emphasizes prayer and morality. It holds up the teachings of Jesus and looks for his return, which so many in those days thought was imminent. It agrees with the letters of Paul in some ways; in others it notably disagrees, most notably on the role of works in relation to faith.

But where James and Paul do agree is that the fate of believers is settled in Christ. The battle is won, so to speak. What believers must then do, James says, is persevere and show, by their conduct, they are followers of Christ.

So, in these ways, the debate for James is not really about the role of one's faith *instead* of one's works. It's not either/or. It's both/and. Not faith *or* works. Faith *and* works. But there is one more element – and it's crucial. That element is wisdom, what James calls "wisdom from above." That wisdom is the guidance of the Divine. And I am sure it's not lost on many of us that Wisdom is a lady.

Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom
.... (T)he 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. (Jas. 3:13b,
17)

In contrast, James says wisdom is not marked by envy or self-ambition, nor is it boastful. Those traits are not from above, but from below.

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Peaceable-ness. Gentleness. Willingness to yield. Mercy and good fruits. No traces of partiality or hypocrisy. Those are the qualities that James called those first century Christians to exhibit in Jerusalem, even in the face of hostility and oppression.

How many might say that describes Christianity today? Not the two people – two separate people in separate situations – who described to me just last week how they had been told they were condemned to hell by people who called themselves Christians.

On the other hand, we have reasons for hope. Lee Hull Moses is the pastor of the First Christian Church in Greensboro. In a recent edition of the magazine *The Christian Century*, she wrote about her congregation's experience prior to last spring's vote in North Carolina over whether our state constitution would be changed to outlaw same-sex marriage.

She organized an informal dialogue where her congregation could discuss the issue. Many there voiced concerns about the harm the amendment would do. One member stood and cited the passages of scripture, including Leviticus, so often used to speak negatively about homosexuality. They've been called the "clobber verses." But another member who held the opposite view spoke up. In her article titled, "Disagreeing in Love¹," the pastor described the scene this way:

"The two of them talked to each other for a minute while the rest of us listened in.

Nobody yelled. Everybody was respectful. We even laughed. There were layers (of the issue) we dipped our toes into but didn't dive in We generated more questions than we could answer by the time our time ran out."

Peaceable-ness. Gentleness. Willingness to yield. Mercy and good fruits. No traces of partiality or hypocrisy. That Greensboro congregation demonstrated those qualities in that meeting, and the body of Christ is stronger for it.

Here in Charlotte, we will have plenty of chances to do the same. A dozen or so sister Presbyterian churches have announced plans to leave our denomination over certain issues. But it's not as simple as wishing them well in their new denominational homes. There are complicated matters of who owns the church property and what, if any,

¹ Christian Century, Sept. 19. P. 12

financial obligation those congregations have to the Presbyterian Church USA if they want to keep their property.

In other Presbyteries, these discussions have gotten ugly. But here in Charlotte, we are aiming for what's being called "gracious separation." A new policy is in the works that would frame a logical and peaceful approach to resolving what is the denominational equivalent to a divorce.

James' call to humility, self-control, mercy and integrity matter in all aspects of life together as the church – from the decision about what color to paint the sanctuary to the committee meeting about the children's Sunday school curriculum to the discussions that lie ahead of Caldwell church about where God is leading us. Those, frankly, I am not worried about.

Because we belong to each other in a larger sense, let us pray that here in Charlotte – and across our denomination – we can, even in matters of disagreement, do as James says, "show, by (our) good life that (our) works are done with gentleness born of wisdom."

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But there is even more to all this. So I invite you to pause a moment and use your imaginations. As I said earlier, the Letter of James is traditionally attributed to James, the brother of Jesus. Most scholars believe it was written well after Jesus' death as an encouragement to those who followed in the way of Jesus.

But – for the sake of imagination – what if it wasn't? What if James had at least worked on a draft of some of his thoughts based on watching Jesus in action – taking on the religious and government powers of his day. Then – now stick with me here – what if James had shared some of his writings to his brother. What if James said:

"Listen, Jesus, it's a long walk to Jerusalem. I've been meaning to show some of my ideas. I've put some down on papyrus. While we're walking, would you mind taking a look and giving me some feedback?"

What might Jesus have said after reading some of what we read today? Maybe it might've been something like this:

"Well James, you're on the right track ... as far as it goes. I like the part about my people's obligation to care for the poor. That's good. Also, I do want my followers to find ways to get along after I'm gone. So your words about how they need to be merciful and

willing to yield to each other should be good reminders when my followers disagree with each other. Keep that.”

“But listen, my brother,” Jesus might have said, “You’ve left some important things out. It just doesn’t go quite far enough. Faith and works together have to be about more than just getting along nicely with other believers. What about the kind of sin that lays beyond our personal, individual behavior? What about the more dangerous kind of sin - the collective sin that gets embedded in society, the kind of sin that gets woven into the very fabric of the way the world works? Can’t you see, little brother, just how easy it is for my followers to worry about their personal conduct and take for granted the much larger injustices in the marketplace, in the Roman government and in the hypocrisy of the Pharisees?”

“So, James,” Jesus might have said, “It’s a good start. I’m proud of you. But you’ve got more work to do.”

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Now, let’s jump back to our time and day. What might we add to James ideas?

If we take seriously the image in Proverbs chapter 1 of the Lady Wisdom raising her voice in the square, would we be called to join her? Last week, I told you that Caldwell House, our transitional shelter for homeless women, will close in March due to a lack of funding from both private and public sources. When I told a local leading homeless advocate about this decision, I asked him what kinds of things Caldwell might consider next. His answer came quickly.

“Advocate,” he said. “Get out there and tell the story of how Caldwell House has changed lives – those of its residents and those in your congregation. Say we need to do better as a city for the most vulnerable among us.”

So, what about this: Tomorrow, we buy a giant ladder that reaches all the way to the top of our bell towers. First, we would climb up and we would paint the old, faded louvers, because we promised Jimmy Todd we would. But then we could invite anyone who wants to climb to the top of the bell tower with a megaphone and cry out like Wisdom herself in the public square. Who would be first? Would it be one of us? Or would it be one of our neighbors at Caldwell House, perhaps one who is just on the verge of getting her life back in order, because I imagine she’d have a thing or two to say.

What might she shout to city hall or the local offices of our representatives in Washington about the needs of the least among us? What might you – or I – shout to the bank towers uptown about their responsibilities? What might we shout to the zip codes in town where people live in mini-mansions behind gates and guards?

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Friends, as we think about what God is calling us to do as individuals and as a congregation, James' words about gentleness born of wisdom matter. They should shape our life as the body of Christ. Lord knows we need more peace and partnership in the church at large, in all its forms and denominations.

Being called to gentleness and humility, however, does not preclude our call to be agents of a God who demands justice. There are sins of commission and sins of omission.

So, we also need to remember what James' brother said and did as he followed lady Wisdom. When we fail to speak up for the poor, to intervene on behalf of the immigrant or to take responsibility for the helpless among us, those are sins of omission. When we mind our own business and abide systems of injustice in our economy and in our public policy that favor the haves over the have-nots, that is a sin of omission.

All that, of course, means our call is not a simple one – if we take it seriously. If we take it seriously, our faith will be sometimes uncomfortable and often unpopular. That doesn't change the fact that it is one of faith *and* works, all wrapped in wisdom, the wisdom we have from above for the asking, the wisdom that cries out for justice in the public square. That wisdom equips us one day to show the gentleness that leads to gracious disagreement, if not reconciliation. It equips us the next day to be the voice of justice in a world so often bent the other way.

It is a "both-and," faith-and-works, James-and-Jesus proposition. Even then, we can say, thanks be to God. Amen.