

September 23, 2012 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### Wisdom from Above

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

*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.*

Mark 9:30-37

*“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”*

In two weeks, current Covenant and Community Members who choose to do so, will recommit for another year of membership. Essentially, ours is a community of persons who respond to the Jesus' call to discipleship by making a commitment to their own lives of faith in the inward and outward dimensions. During these days, as I reflect on my own decision, I try to listen to the weekly scripture readings in light of this call to the life of faith as we live it out in the Church of the Covenant Community.

The life of faith we talk about and work with is something real, something of which we are capable, with the help and energy of God's spirit. The life of faith is the ongoing awakening in us of our true humanity as those created and love by God. The disciplines, or practices, to which we commit ourselves and with which we work as faithfully as we can, give our lives a necessary and fruitful shape or form. I often refer to the word *trellis* to provide an image for the role in our lives of spiritual discipline or practice. *Trellis* is a French word used in certain religious orders, translated as *rule*, such as the Rule of St. Benedict. The particular disciplines of Community and Covenant Membership are our “rule” as a spiritual community, if you will. A *trellis*, of course, we know as a structure built in a garden, a framework that gives a rose or other vine something upon which to climb. It is a support for the life and growth of the vine. It is the same with the membership commitments we make and work with. They are not for their own sake, to be obeyed like laws. They give our lives a meaningful and fruitful form so that we can grow into fullness of life as God created us to live.

I have been thinking a great deal about why, for instance, it is so important to set aside at least one period of time each day for our inward journey work—silence, reading, reflection, honest self-examination, writing in our journal, praying for ourselves, others, the world, our own faith community. We do it so that *something might happen*. We make space in our lives so that we are

open and receptive, so that we can see more clearly into and understand our own inner life, and perceive what we feel God is calling us to and what gifts God has given us to share. If we do this inner work faithfully and over time, we gain the insight and understanding that frees us from the things that bind us and for the things God calls us to do.

Faithful daily inward journey work opens us to something that has become of increasing interest to me. It is called **wisdom**, a rich and ancient tradition in our own Jewish/Christian spiritual tradition that connects with other religious traditions as well. We find it in the Book of Proverbs, for instance, but also sprinkled throughout the Psalms. About two years ago, I was commissioned to write a hymn for the centennial of a nearby Disciples of Christ congregation. The text suggested to me was from the Book of Proverbs. It was the work on that hymn that renewed my interest in wisdom and what it means for our spiritual lives today.

The Letter of James and Jesus' teachings stand in the wisdom tradition. Wisdom is our capacity to see and understand ourselves and the world through our relationship with God, putting that insight and understanding into practice in our daily lives. The true meaning of *the fear of God*, a central idea in the wisdom tradition, is living with awareness of life in its sacred dimension. The wisdom tradition is about what that means in how we understand and treat ourselves, others, and the world, and what values we hold and decisions we make. In short, wisdom is about how we live as those who are aware that our life and the life of the world comes from God.

James writes: *Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom*. For James, it is not enough to do good works, but to do them with the right spirit, a spirit of gentleness born of wisdom. Wisdom is not about intellectual capacities—how smart we are, or think we are, how much we know, or think we know. It is about being open to *the wisdom from above* that enables us to be pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, and to refrain from making judgments, taking sides, playing favorites, or pretending we are something we are not(3:17). Growing in this wisdom, we become aware of and let go of those things in us that cause us to be in conflict with others(4:1-3). James has a clear understanding that when we are not doing our inward journey work, being aware of and dealing our anger, hurt, dissatisfaction, fear, and other inner knots, what he calls our “cravings”, we ourselves are the cause of tensions, conflicts, and the absence of peace.

James believes we, as followers and a community of Jesus, are capable of living with such wisdom. Yet, it calls for us to have what we call an inward journey, a regular and significant time and way of looking deeply, honestly, and yet compassionately at our own inner life. There we see where we are knotted up, attached, driven by longings and cravings that keep us dissatisfied and unpeaceful with others and ourselves. James' words could be a fitting description of what we do when we return to our inward journey. *We draw near to God who draws near to us*. When we

practice being quiet, becoming inwardly still, we can give attention to our lives without fear or anxiousness. We are able to understand more fully what is going on in us that keeps us from the peaceableness, gentleness, and the impartiality with which we can look at each person, and ourselves, with love. This is the wisdom born from above. The inward journey that we work with each day is the *trellis* that enables us to become open to and receive *the wisdom from above*, and to grow over time in our capacity to live each day with the wisdom and love of God. With James, it is not only important WHAT we do—the outward journey—but HOW and with what spirit we do it, which is the work of our inward journey.

Jesus makes wisdom very concrete. He and the disciples are walking along. Jesus is talking again about the cross—the way of love that is willing to suffer in order to bring new life, resurrection. The disciples still don't understand, but they are afraid to ask. I find this comforting. Like us, the first disciples have a hard time getting it.

They come to the town of Capernaum and enter a house where, I suppose, they are going to stay for the night. Jesus asks them what they were talking about along the way. Oops! Jesus must have overheard a little discussion they had among themselves. There is an embarrassed silence, then they finally come clean. They were arguing about which of them was the greatest, the most important. Jesus does not get mad. He sees this as a “teaching moment”. “Look,” he says, “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” A complete reversal of everything they had come to believe. The wisdom Jesus has to do with NOT being the greatest, the best, the first in line. It is not about my own interests, getting my way. It is not about getting affirmation or recognition. It is about servanthood, finding fulfillment of our lives in the service of life around us. Jesus is saying to the disciples that true life, meaningful life, is not about getting what I want, or “making my mark”, being better than someone else in some way. It is about living in ways that nourish life around me, whether anyone notices or not.

I've got a sixty-fifth birthday coming up before too long. I notice after many years of this inward journey work that my view of things has changed, and is still changing. I used to feel a sense of anxiety as I thought about drawing near the end of my life. What do I still want to accomplish? What else do I have to do in order to feel fulfilled? What is the legacy I want to leave? Those things don't seem to matter any longer. There are things I feel myself called to, gifts I know that I need to use. But it is no longer about personal fulfillment. It is about seeing my life more and more clearly as a small part of something far greater. And that is how I want to live whatever days or years are left—with respect for and service to that greater reality that is life on and as part of this earth. I would like to think—and I hope it is so—that my ego is shrinking as my truest Self is emerging, the Self that is related to all of life in God.

Jesus makes it very real, very practical. He takes a child who is there in the house, maybe

the child of the host family, and sets her on his knee. “See this child?” he says. “Whoever welcomes a little child like this welcomes me. And if you welcome me, you are welcoming God.” If you can welcome, which means paying attention to and honoring a small child, then you are on the threshold of wisdom. Why? In our society, as in Jesus’ day, small children are not really honored. They can’t get you ahead in the game. They don’t bring you prestige. They don’t know and could care less about how smart or accomplished or powerful you are or how much money you’ve got. They don’t even care about the great things you have done for the world. Furthermore, they are wiser than we are. They are nearer to God. The kingdom of God is theirs already. Jesus said that, too. Better we should be concerned about what young children have to teach us than how we are going to shape and mold them. And, I think, what Jesus was trying to get across was that, if we are able to really welcome a little child, then we will be able to see and let go of all the things that don’t matter, yet which have been making us so miserable. We will come closer to the wisdom from above, see what truly matters and what does not.

I think James and Jesus are talking about the same thing. The wisdom that enables us to live fully and fruitfully, is the wisdom that comes from above, if we work each day to be receptive to it. If we can keep in mind what it takes for us to welcome a little child, that, too, will lead us to awareness of the life to which Jesus calls us, and in which he instructs and empowers us. I believe we are created to be wise in this way. Yet it comes to us as a gift, from above, as James says. In order to receive it and to grow in it, we need a *trellis*, a form for our lives. And that is what we commit to as Covenant and Community Members.