“Be Thou My Wisdom”
James 3:13-4:8

There is a story about an angel who appears at a religious leaders’ meeting and tells the leader of that group that God wants to reward him for his exemplary behavior. God gives the leader a choice of infinite wealth, wisdom, or beauty. Without hesitating, the leader selects infinite wisdom. “Done!” says the angel, and then the angel disappears in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning. At that point, everyone else turns their heads toward the leader. One of them whispers to him, “Say something.” The leader sighs and says, “I should have taken the money.” Wisdom does not pay thus it is not popular. It doesn’t make breaking news on CNN. But James wants to keep it in front of us.

In the midst of the polyphonic choir of current events that resound in dissonance with news reports of ongoing dilemmas in the world, James speaks. In the midst of continuous protests over an anti-Islam film, intense (to put it lightly) partisan political discourse in an election year, supposed new discoveries about Jesus, and a man seeking adventure jumping into the Bronx Zoo tiger pit who ends up meeting the teeth of Tony the Tiger, James speaks. In the midst of this cacophony of media sound bites, rises James’s faint voice from the pages of today’s biblical pericope. James is a Christian ethicist in New Testament residence. When everyone thinks their opinion is the right opinion and their way is the right way, and when they sing proudly a musical mantra in the mode of Frank Sinatra “I Did It My Way,” James raises a question that we sorely need to hear these days, “Who is wise and understanding among you? (3:13)”

In the whirlwind of our wacky world, James calls for wisdom. He urges those who are wise to stand up and be counted in the chorus of humanity. But as we know, wisdom does not win the New York Times headline news contest. Wisdom does not sell well. There are no technological upgrades to make it perform better or newer versions of wisdom available. Wisdom is as ancient as God and personified Wisdom cries out in the street, in the squares, at the busiest corners, at the entrance of the city gates, in university quads, at Q-Shacks, raising her voice just as we heard in last week’s lectionary text.

But other voices block out wisdom’s voice. People refuse her counsel and do not listen to her. In the wisdom traditions of the Old Testament, specifically in Proverbs 8, we find wisdom right alongside God at creation in the divine executive cabinet. But that does not seem to matter. In the thought process of James there exists a type of wisdom that competes with the wisdom of God. James has a dyadic perspective on wisdom.

The first may be called human wisdom or what I think of as “wisdom from below.” If you want to feel good about yourself and pat yourself on the back for all of your accomplishments, you might not want to read James. Some may think he’s a sourpuss, a glass-half-empty kind of person. That may be true, but he does have a point to make. There is a form of human wisdom in which everyone basically does what is right in their own eyes, according to their own
interests. This wisdom from below, from the self, is really a misguided expression of wisdom because its order leads to chaos rooted in envy and selfish ambition. James takes most of his time to paint the pitiful picture of this distorted wisdom. The fruits of this wisdom from below, referred by James as “earthly” and even “devilish,” are conflict, dispute, disorder and anarchy (3:14). James is clear that this happens because of one’s own selfish ambitions, cravings, and desire to satisfy one’s pleasures. If the top of one’s priority list in a 5-year plan for your life is self-pleasure, this might be a problem for Dr. Phil to handle.

Wisdom from below does not look out past the tip of one’s own nose, in the words of my Aunt Pat’s mother-wit; it only navel-gazes, consumed with the self for guidance and wisdom. The self becomes the sage, and nothing and no one can say otherwise. If this is the case, one may end up like that dog that had a bone in his jaws and, crossing a bridge over a stream, saw another dog below with what appeared to be a bigger, juicier bone. The dog jumps into the stream to snatch the bigger bone, letting go of his own bone in the process. But in the end, to the dog’s dismay, the bigger bone and bone’s owner were only his own reflection in the water. So the dog ended up with nothing. Greed and selfish ambition will give you nothing in the end. He followed his own dog-eat-dog world wisdom, and it got the best of him. Wisdom from below will eventually destroy you, and according to James, it will put you at distance, detached from God. Detachment from God is a primer for disorder in life.

On the other hand, wisdom “from above”, the alternative in James’s dyadic understanding of wisdom, points us in the direction of God, who James earlier in his letter said would give generously if asked for wisdom. When James asks, “Who is wise among you?” he points us to look beyond and above ourselves for wisdom (3:13). He wants us to look higher to God thus he urges us to “draw near to God” (4:8). He’s inherited a proverbial wisdom tradition that proclaims, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. (Prov. 9:10)” He wants us to turn our gaze from the self to God who is above all things. God is not only the fount of every blessing but the wellspring of wisdom. Wisdom from above is wisdom from the immortal, invisible God, who alone is wise. The rhetorical catalogue of virtues of wisdom from above are expressions of God—“pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (3:17). Wisdom like this can only stem from God. Who is wise among you? I know God is, but are you?

I know we have Christians who eat the Bible for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and can quote every chapter and verse from Genesis to Revelation. I know there are those who know the Apostle’s Creed by heart, but are you wise?

There was a missionary who was walking in Africa when he heard the ominous noise of a lion behind him. “Oh Lord,” prayed the missionary, “Grant in Thy goodness that the lion walking behind me is a good Christian lion.” And then, in the silence that followed, the missionary heard the lion praying too: “Oh Lord, I thank Thee for the food which I am about to receive.” The missionary might have been doing the Lord’s work, but in that moment he wasn’t wise. I know prayer changes things, but in that moment, he needed to run, or at least run while praying.
Who is wise among you? We have Christian saints and sinners, but we need more sages in the church.

What is interesting is that James is not satisfied with just thinking about wisdom as a mental exercise. James urges us to be wise and embody wisdom from above, which is why he says, “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom” (3:13).

Wisdom works. Undergirding James’s teaching is the wisdom literature of the Old Testament where wisdom is associated with practical good behavior, not speculative thought. Christian wisdom, according to theologian David Ford of the University of Cambridge, is about the “nerve of wise living before God.” Wisdom as a way of life, way of thinking and being in the world, is living in light of what we know. It is an integration of contemplation and action grounded in an all-wise, all-loving God. One may even view theology as wisdom, a “practical habitus of knowledge whose end is salvation,” as theologian Edward Farley puts it. One wears, enfleshes, and practices the knowledge of God in the world. Theology as wisdom, or as sapience, includes correct information about God, but it also stresses attachment to that knowledge through love that finds its expression in a holy life for a holy God by the grace of God. This, as theologian Ellen Charry calls it, is “sapiential theology.”

James doesn’t use this theological classroom jargon, but he is teaching the same lesson. Who wants to be wise? Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Wisdom is about being attached to God through love. God is not an object to be studied or analyzed but a living subject to be loved and the One who loves us. In this theological vocation that we call being Christian, one hopefully does not solely pursue knowing about God. Instead, one must know God who is wise and, through this encounter, be transformed by divine love to live wisely in the world - not mere intellectual or cognitive assent but relational existential intimacy with God as close as the breath, ruach in Hebrew, spirit, pulsating through our bodies. A relationship between the knower and the known. Attachment to God. Communion with Wisdom from above. Deep personal knowledge and commitment that reveals itself via practical wisdom in the world. Desiring God with brains and bowels. Who is wise among you? Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

God draws near to us at the table of the Eucharist. At this table, we see Christ crucified, the wisdom of God making foolish the wisdom of the world. Wisdom cries out, not from a street, but from the cross, asking you to come and digest divine wisdom through the body and blood of our Lord. In his 2005 Commencement address at my alma mater, Stanford University, Steve Jobs, the then CEO of Apple Computer and of Pixar Animation Studios, concluded his remarks by saying, “Stay hungry. Stay foolish.” I say, “Come hungry. Come foolish,” hungering for wisdom and in so doing, long for God, as you participate in a meal that many deem foolishness. As you come, may this be your prayer: “Be thou my wisdom and thou my true word, I ever with thee and thou with me Lord.” Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Who is wise among us? There is One among us---To the only wise God our Savior, be glory, majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen” (Jude 1:25).