

“A Faith That Transforms Lives: Part IV”  
*Possession, Desire, and the Wisdom from Above*

Pentecost Proper 20 – September 20, 2009

James 3:13--4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

*You do not have, because you do not ask.*

<sup>3</sup>*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly,*

*in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.*

These few words speak of possession, passion, pleasure, in a word: desire! And James’s point here is not to criticize desire so much as to explain why our desires fail so miserably: because they are often governed by earthly rather than divine wisdom. Remember, his earlier admonition:

<sup>1:5</sup> *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.*

Here he returns to this admonishment against a divided mind and divided loyalties, saying

<sup>3:13</sup> *Who is wise and understanding among you?*

*Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.*

So we begin with a call to have our “works [...] done with gentleness (meekness) born of wisdom,” and we remember Jesus’s words from our Gospel reading: ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ James throughout his letter is calling us to Christ-likeness, to see the Word and wisdom of God made flesh in Christ become flesh in our midst. And just as with Christ, those of us who follow him will find ourselves at odds with this world as well. Indeed the battle to be waged, against double-mindedness, is, as St. Paul says, not against flesh and blood but against the powers and

principalities; it is a battle between these competing wisdoms, between the earthly, unspiritual, devilish wisdom and the “wisdom from above.”

James immediately lays out examples of the former earthly wisdom in action: bitter envy (*zelos*, zeal!) and selfish ambition (Aristotle: factional, greedy politicians). “Do not be boastful and false to the truth.” This “envy” and “selfish ambition” will create “disorder” and “wickedness of every kind.” Why? Because a spring is only as fresh as its source. These *disorders* find their source not in the Creator of the Universe, the Giver of Life, the One who has ordered his Creation by his Love, but rather from the disorder and wickedness that is sin. In other words, the wisdom from above is the Wisdom made flesh in Christ, the Wisdom by which the world was created and to whose end the world is directed. The wisdom from below is not human wisdom *per se*—for who is Jesus if not fully Human and fully God—but it is the wisdom generated by a world that chooses its own disorder over God’s good order. In fact, it is a world in which human creatures have usurped God’s place and believe that they are in charge, that they are ordering the world.

The irony is that this is precisely the role that God has given us: to serve God and rule the world! But it is his gift; it cannot be grasped or taken, it must be received with patience, the kind of patience that prayer requires:

*Denial* by George Herbert

When my devotions could not pierce  
    Thy silent ears,  
Then was my heart broken, as was my verse;  
    My breast was full of fears  
    And disorder.

My bent thoughts, like a brittle bow,  
    Did fly asunder:  
Each took his way; some would to pleasures go,  
    Some to the wars and thunder  
    Of alarms.

“As good go anywhere,” they say,  
“As to benumb  
Both knees and heart, in crying night and day,  
*Come, come, my God, O come!*  
But no hearing.”

O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue  
To cry to thee,  
And then not hear it crying! All day long  
My heart was in my knee,  
But no hearing.

Therefore my soul lay out of sight,  
Untuned, unstrung:  
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,  
Like a nipped blossom, hung  
Discontented.

O cheer and tune my heartless breast,  
Defer no time;  
That so thy favors granting my request,  
They and my mind may chime,  
And mend my rhyme.

Notice that Herbert understands that God’s granting his request will involve his being ‘tuned,’ ‘strung,’ ordered to God’s song; prayer is to have our rhyme mended to God’s great speech, both generally in Creation and particularly and ultimately in Christ. Herbert’s is an honest plea for God to hear and get him back in tune with God’s melody--his great triune fugue!--which alone in the end can incorporate and resolve our dissonant chords. And so James provides the disordered church with a look at God’s rhyme, the beauty of God’s song.

The wisdom from above is Pure (first), Peaceable, Gentle, Willing to Yield (open to reason/easily persuaded), Full of mercy and good fruits, Impartial (or unwavering), and Unhypocritical. Just as the rain from above (or water from the North!) combined with good soil yields a bountiful harvest, we are told that “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” As

we have been reminded in this “Faith that Transforms” series, James has his eyes set on a bumper crop of righteousness.

And now James continues to get specific: he’s already addressed our propensity to hear the word and not do it, our partiality and favoritism, our fawning over the rich and famous and ignoring the poor and least among us, the way in which we use the same tongue to bless and curse. So he goes straight to the heart of the matter: desire! “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?” (I know where they come from, from that person arguing with me!) “Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?” This word “cravings” (*hedone*, passions, self-indulgent pleasure) describes our desire as completely self-centered, as St. Augustine said, and Luther following him: *incurvatus est* (“we are turned in upon ourselves”).

And here James moves from desire to war. We have a miniature lesson on violence: “you want something and do not have it; so you commit murder.” Now I’m not going to rule out that there were some in the church killing each other, and anyone who knows history cannot rule this out altogether, but it is quite possible that James is pointing out the logical progression, both warning that this is where killing comes from and this is where our disordered desires are leading us! But, note, it’s not just wanting something, it’s coveting, it’s wanting something that somebody else has or wants. We have entire industries based upon this manufacturing of desire; we just had an entire economic meltdown fueled (at least in part) by this very disordered desire.

“We fail to see the violence in our wealth.” Even as we want to say that there is enough to go around for everyone, who need only responsibly get their hands on some, we also by our behavior act as if it is a zero sum game. It has recently been argued that “money is our metaphysics”—that “money is the only thing in which we must have faith.” Money buys us protection, security, which often means isolation, or at least engaging the world on our own terms, safely viewing the violence of the world

from our TVs. As one theologian writes, “we cannot see that our safety has been bought at the expense of others. We cannot see that the violence of the city, which too often is self-destructive, is a judgment on us.” St. John Chrysostom saw it and wrote: "Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours but theirs." (Homily on Lazarus 2.5)

Wealth is such a crucial barometer because its use and misuse reveal the fundamental discord or harmonies at work in the world. So far from being a random interjection into his letter, our money and possessions are directly related to our desire for God and his wisdom. Of course we must be careful not to fall into the ludicrous health-and-wealth, false gospels that seem to abound and that rob from the weak and prey upon the poor. And even as we wrestle with our right and proper use of his good gifts, we remember that the same Jesus who said “Ask and ye shall receive” is the Jesus whose favorite appellation for money was ‘unrighteous mammon.’

<sup>1:5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.

He’s not saying that prayer is like Dorothy clicking her heals, saying there’s no place like home, that if you really believe, then it will happen—God is not our fairy godmother. God gives incredibly good gifts to the whole world; life itself is from Him! But it is only as we are submitted to God, recognizing that the gifts of our Creator are meant for us to share, that we will be able to receive all that God has for us in such a way that it is not a burden, a millstone, or a threat but that which gives life.

So we are challenged this morning to take a good look at our desires, at our riches, at our warring amongst ourselves, and the violence perpetrated at our hands—for in James’s terms this is a sort of mirror showing to which wisdom we are subject. For envious zeal and selfish ambition sadly

appear to rule in the church as much as in our surrounding culture. But it must not be so! The Church is called to be the Body of Christ, the place where Creation is being rightly ordered, that bears witness to God's purposes for the entire world. We are to be a place of peace, showing forth a harvest of righteousness, the wisdom from above made visible for all the world to see. And this can only happen with meekness, because we follow and worship the One who humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. And our hope is that united to his death, we will also be united with him in his resurrection, when, as Hopkins wrote:

“I am all at once what Christ is,  
since he was what I am. . .”

Desire fulfilled; pleasures forevermore; wisdom from above. Amen.