

Sunday September 23, 2018

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

St. Mark 9: 30-37

Some sermons are easier to develop than others. Such, we find, as today's effort become no more than following and explaining lines of scripture that seem pretty straightforward. The James text today is so rich in specifics for the faithful conduct among believers, that one need only offer some expounding on each line already present. And, the Gospel lesson provides a poignant example of how easily believers can become distracted from the very mission to which they have been called and instead become embroiled in disruptive disputes.

So, we begin with the story in the gospel. Whatever his reasons, Jesus waits until the group's journey has concluded before asking his disciples why they had begun arguing among themselves during their walk. It becomes clear that they were contending among themselves as to whom among them was more valuable to Jesus and the mission than the others. Their squabble was petty and contentious and clearly beneath their calling as disciples. Still, it is so similar to many church conflicts that have and continue to occur.

Rarely are church fights about principle or theology nearly as much as they are based on personality, power and/or prestige. As is written in the James lesson—such thinking results from envy and ambition. Oh, I am certain the disciples in their arguing would have made statements concerning who knew more about scripture and who was more orthodox than the others. All of that would have been smoke screen for the ambitious attempts to be at the head of the class. Jesus acts quickly by gathering them together and teaching what is the nature of true discipleship, “Whoever would be first must be servant of all.” I am confident that what we read in the lesson from James today is a reflection of how then Jesus fully explained servanthood.

We see that we are to become wise in understanding. This concerns a maturing awareness of being willing to do the will of God as described in the Psalms and Proverbs, along with the teachings of the prophets. It is not so much the ability to expound on various theological or doctrinal matters, but rather to put into daily practice of the love of God and neighbor. It is to learn to avoid the pretense and pettiness of squabbles such as the one in which the disciples had become embroiled. The way of spiritual wisdom is to focus, heart and mind, upon the timeless guidance of these God-given teachings. And, we must remember, nowhere do any of the writings suggest that any one among us is more important than anyone else.

It is all provided to us in order that we become better able to lead lives of truly good works, with a gentleness of God's spirit. We are not to allow the goal to become more important than the actions we employ. Motives are to be pure in intent and not as a disguise for gaining attention or enhancing power, prestige or profit. It is clear, any such base motives ultimately will result in discord and malevolent outcomes.

The wisdom spoken of, which I believe is what Jesus intended in his discussion on discipleship is first and foremost pure of motive. There should be no duplicity, which leads to rancor and a fracturing of unity.

Above all, service or servanthood strives to promote peace and trust among the fellowship. Such service promotes unity in a spirit of collaboration for achieving consensus. Here we would do well to

recall the words of Benjamin Franklin when he was asked as to why our new nation should not simply have pure democracy. Franklin stated, "If we are not careful and only state that majority rules, then democracy can become little more than 2 wolves and a sheep deciding what to have for dinner." Learning to work for the good of the whole is what was displayed in the very early church, of which we read in the Book of Acts.

The gentleness spoken of in this passage has to do with our process for seeking understanding. We are to willingly listen for discerning, even if it takes longer; and discussing without arguing, is how discerning direction for action is to be achieved.

In all efforts cultivating a readiness to acknowledge other person's point of view just may have merit and that our own opinion may not be correct or helpful in any given circumstance. No where in scripture do we ever read that stubborn refusal to consider another point of view is a virtue.

Further, true servanthood strives always for reconciliation when discord emerges. There is to be no my way or the highway in the fellowship. Seeking even handed solutions to any and all matters of concern is a vital aspect of learning to live by the Golden rule of doing unto others. In this approach, our learning to seek the best for the other and the community is to be both our goal and motive for service.

We are never to become caught up in promoting partisan agendas. Considering thoughtfully and without bias other points of view is how healthy forging of plans for action are to be developed. Again, consensus is how we ensure the weakest voices among us are given due representation. There are never to be separate standards for those persons we like or who can feather our nest, and separate standards for persons who we either dislike, disagree with or who expediency would indicate we can overlook. There is always to be equal application of care for all members.

And, it is important to note that servanthood calls us to grow in the awareness that the principles outlined in James are to be integrated. All of these guidelines are to be utilized in governing our approach and at all times. No issue before the people of God ever justifies abandoning all or any of these guidelines. We are to conduct ourselves always in accord with this understanding of what is wisdom.

Does it sound naïve or beyond our ability? Yes, clearly it is a challenge to the way of the world, the ways in which most of us are far better versed than we are in scripture. But, we must recall that the temptation to yield to base desire of personal or partisan ambition come as a result of what James refers to as the internal conflict between what we profess to believe and what our emotions desire.

It is in learning to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, Mind, soul and strength working together that we begin to mature and achieve the God worthy goal of wise and loving servanthood.

