

September 23, 2012 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost James 3:13-4:3, 7-8

Watch *Me Church* video from You Tube.

This video keeps you guessing a little bit. It starts off with stuff you can agree with but then goes farther and farther. By the time the guy is getting Super Bowl tickets and the kid a pony you know this is a joke. It is interesting if you read the comments about this video on You Tube you realize that some people take it all seriously and never realize it's a joke.

This video is a great way to introduce the ideas behind our second reading from James. People were taking their Christian faith and seeing it as a way to fulfill their selfish ambitions. Their attitude toward prayer was that God should give them what they wanted, whatever they wanted, simply because they asked for it and God promised to fulfill prayer. In 4:2a-3 we find, "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures." Now we know that prayer isn't about having God indulge our hedonistic desires, but I have a feeling many a prayer ends up being that way anyway.

The book of James in the Bible is getting at some of the deepest and most fundamental desires we have as human beings. At the root of it all is this, do you believe that God is good and that God will give you all the good things that you need? Or, do you believe you need something more - that God somehow left you lacking or deprived?

For James, true wisdom, or wisdom from above, is recognizing that God is good and that God will give you all that you need. Earthly wisdom, or wisdom from below, believes that you need something more.

In order to fully understand James you need to understand that behind his writings is a thorough understanding of Greek and Roman philosophy. He may have familiar with the teachings of Socrates and Aristotle. James talks a lot about envy, jealousy and selfish ambition. Socrates called envy the "ulcer of the soul." Aristotle describes a "certain sorrow" that is felt because someone has something that we do not. We want it and won't feel complete until we get it.

In the wisdom from below, driven by this envy, people equate *being* with *having*. Theologian Luke Timothy Johnson notes, "A person's identity and worth derive from what can be acquired and possessed. In such a view, to have less is to be less real, less worthy, less important... Conversely, to have more is to be more real, more worthy, and more important." (New Interpreter's Bible Volume 12 Pg. 211)

You've heard me preach many times that advertisers prey on this constantly. First they have to make you feel less than whole. They have to make you feel needy. They have to make you feel like there is something wrong with you. And then, with their great and benevolent nature, they will provide you with the stuff you need to be fixed and perfect.

It is a sad critique to make, but one that has to be made, that almost the entire economy of our country runs on this "wisdom from below". People sometimes complain about not having displays of the 10 Commandments or a nativity scene in a public park. They say it is removing God and our Christian faith from society. I personally feel this is missing the real issue. The real issue is that the normal operating principles of our

society are simply demonic. So much of everything in our culture revolves around the idea that the person God made when God made you isn't good enough and is somehow lacking. I am appalled at the arrogance of such a culture.

The Me Church video we started with humorously points out what happens when the wisdom from below comes to full life in a church. The results are absurd.

So, what do we do? What do we - who know that God made us good - do in this society that is deeply committed to teaching us otherwise?

I think we have to remember that we are to be in the world but not of the world; but that's a tough spot to be in. If we honestly look at ourselves I think we all find that there's a decent measure of this wisdom from below at work in us. It is hard to trust in the goodness of a God you cannot see but have trust in the world around you that you can see. When you get a scowl from people for bucking against the ways of the world, but praise and attention for following along, it's pretty easy to just go along.

A perennial problem many parents face is juggling their children's schedules with family and faith priorities. You know the pressure of the society if your child doesn't conform. I like to have my kids in scouting programs. Emma is in Girl Scouts and Ben is in Cub Scouts. I think it gives them the best well rounded experience available to children. But in the minds of most parents, the scouting schedule has to flex to the music or sports agendas their children have. Be obstinate about it and you lose. And of course don't even consider bucking the church's agenda against anything else.

I say none of this to make us feel guilty, but to remind us of how hard it truly is to live the wisdom from above. Here are my next-to-the-last thoughts from Luke Timothy Johnson on the Book of James:

"[James] is addressing members of the Christian community who gather in the name of Jesus and profess the faith of the glorious Lord Jesus Christ, but whose attitudes and action are not yet fully in friendship with God... James sees that conversion is never complete. There is always double-mindedness, even among those who truly want to be friends of God. The wisdom from below is not easy to abandon or avoid,

precisely because it is the "way of the world," inscribed not only in the language and literature of our surrounding culture but also in our very hearts... James shows how hard it is, and how necessary it is to "[draw near to God]" (NRSV insertion by me) if humans are to avoid that demonic wisdom that makes even a prayer a means of manipulating God."

And the last thoughts from James himself, "Submit yourselves therefor to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

Amen