

Being the Church at Brentwood

The Wisdom of Compassion

**Ps 1 & James 3:13-18
(712, 220, 694, 625)**

September 23, 2012

I suggested at the end of the sermon last week that we recognize that our words have real power to shape the way we see and construct reality. Then I encouraged us to use words carefully and compassionately during the coming week and every week after that.

I kept in the fore of my mind this week the words of that wise woman from the streets of the inner city in Winnipeg,
“There is a good person ...”
That person may be behaving in problematic ways - for themselves, for their children, for their neighbours, for the broader community, but they are in their essential being a good person, a child and a friend of God, one of God’s beloved human creatures.

While in the flesh among us, God has gone so far as to tell us that the way we treat people is the way we treat God.
Our words may be full of praise and respect, but if we do not deal with the least of these our brothers and sisters with the same honour and respect that we give to God, then our words are, as Paul so eloquently said to the Corinthians, “... *no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell.*” (1 Cor 13:2)

James goes on in his letter to talk about compassion.

We’ve seen how this letter is a form of wisdom literature. It’s filled with practical advice on being the church in the midst of the diverse communities in which early churches were planted. These are wise insights to help people follow Jesus in ways that both form them for service to the Kingdom and enable them to witness to the power of God’s love in their lives.

Formation as friends and followers of Jesus Christ
and the witness we bear to that in the ways we live –
those are the purposes that lie at the heart
of everything we do as the church.

Forming ourselves and our families and our friends and our churches
to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ
and choosing to use every opportunity God places before us
to witness to the resilient grace that nourishes our souls to flourish –
that is our mission.

All Christian wisdom flows from and serves that mission.

There are many passages of wisdom literature
in the Old Testament –
Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.

That's where the author of James would have learned to write this way.

If we look at the first three chapters of Proverbs,
we get a clear picture of how the Jewish tradition
that was so powerful in shaping early Christians saw the nature of true wisdom.

It began with the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7).
Fear, as it is used in our culture, is not the best English translation.
In Hebrew, it does not carry the connotation of being terrified
by an evil force.

Rather, it points to honouring and respecting.
'Fearing' God in this way leads to recognition of and reverence for
God's loving mercy.

We are in awe of God's grace.
We know that God's wrath has been dealt with by Jesus Christ,
so we are free from that kind of fear to follow and flourish.
God's assurance in Jesus Christ that we no longer need to fear his judgement
leads to trust and obedience.

We trust and obey out of gratitude for the gift given,
not out of fear for the consequences we might suffer if we offend.

The purpose of life, in this way of seeing things,
is glorifying God and enjoying God forever.

We glorify and enjoy by living compassionate lives.

That again is what we find in the early chapters of Proverbs.
Wisdom is given by God for the protection of his people.
God sows in our hearts an understanding
of what is right and just and fair. (2:6-10)

That seeds of God's faithful love will never leave us,
no matter how badly we neglect it
or how poorly we cultivate it.
It is always there to become afresh
health and nourishment for us. (3:3-8)

As we continue through the insights of the biological sciences
to discover how wonderfully complex yet coherent
this human species is put together and works,
we understand more clearly how wisdom operates.

Here's how I've come to understand it.
There are three clusters of neurons in our bodies –
one in the gut, one in the heart, and the largest in the head.
Most commonly, we call these centres instinct, emotion, and intellect.

Instinct is seeded with the wisdom of the historic species,
with messages encoded over the generations in our DNA
that is designed to protect us from danger.

Emotion is seeded with the wisdom of immediate response,
With messages of strong excitement and readiness
that is designed to help us deal quickly to what is happening.

Intellect is seeded with the wisdom of reflection,
where the messages of instinct and emotion are processed
and decisions are made as to the appropriate response in the circumstances.

Wisdom involves all three working together in collaboration
to pursue a purpose that has meaning.

You might remember three weeks ago,
when we considered 'Inner Worth,'
that I used a quote by Victor Frankl
that had been very formative in shaping the work of Stephen Covey.
The quote was this:

***Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response.
In those choices lie our growth and our happiness.***

The kind of wisdom literature we have been exploring
is there to help us make wise choices,
choices that are formed by our reverence for the loving God
that we find revealed for us in Jesus Christ.

That is the kind of wisdom James encourages us to discover.
Some traditions in the early church suggest
that the James who wrote this letter was the brother of Jesus,
so it is quite possible that the author knew the mind of Christ intimately.
He would have been with Jesus as he immersed himself in
and was formed by the wisdom and compassion of the Jewish tradition
before starting his public witness at the age of 30.

And that's what Jesus was recovering
for those who saw and heard him first –
the wisdom of compassion
that lies at the heart of God's work in this world.

And James is pretty clear about how we show that in our lives –
being good to others, peace-loving, considerate,
obedient to God, full of mercy, beneficial,
impartial and sincere.

It would do us and our neighbours well this week
if we were to continue to consider
how both our words and our actions witness
to the wisdom of compassion.

We live in a world fascinated with violence.
It's in the news, fills our entertainment,
bombards our senses endlessly.
To fully process these stimuli in a wise, compassionate way
takes the kind of strength and resilience
that comes from faith in Jesus Christ.
That is what this congregation seeks to form.
That is how this congregation seeks to witness.

I trust our time together reflecting on this passage from James
has nourished afresh the seeds of compassionate wisdom
that God has sown deep in each and every one of us.

Preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian Fraser
Minister with Brentwood Presbyterian Church