

Exodus 34:29-35
James 3:13-18

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 7, 2010

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. *James 3:16-18*

The brief letter of James toward the end of the New Testament is a very practical book, but not in the sense a how-to book. Rather it invites the hearer (you may recall that we said all scripture was written to read out loud) to journey into the heart of wisdom, from which *right conduct* emerges. Now there are two kinds of wisdom, James reminds us: earthly wisdom, which is a threadbare imitation of divine wisdom, and is self-absorbed and often destructive. This is the wisdom whose taste lingers so briefly that the old Peggy Lee song sounds in the background, "Is that all there is?" False wisdom responds to an interior desire to have one's needs or tastes, ambitions or material yearnings met. "For where there is envy and selfish ambition," James wrote, "there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind." So it is false wisdom that drives economies and wars. I learned that historians have catalogued, over the past 3,000 years no less than 3,300 wars. Each was driven by one or more of five passions—a show of pageantry, the desire to possess ("All wars are economic," Jacob Bronowski famously said in *The Ascent of Man*), the desire to protect, to exact a profit, or to bring peace.

Yet we cannot escape coming to terms with the fact that Jesus, whom we have pledged ourselves to follow, had an unshakeable passion for peace, even unto death, refusing to adopt the methods his accusers used on him. And so James, looking to his savior and ours, writes, "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace."

Happiness, I think you might agree, is a state of peace. It seems ludicrous to think of being happy in a state of disorder or malcontent. Happiness is especially a social thing or, better put, a relational or shared thing. It's Wednesday nights at St. John's. It's the hum of coffee fellowship on Sunday mornings. It's falling in love all over again with the same person after thirty-seven years. Happiness can also be a solitary feeling, so long as other things—especially relationships—are in order.

I'm currently reading Malcolm Gladwell's recent book, *Outliers*, a fascinating study of what makes some people better or more accomplished than their contemporaries in the arts, technology, sports, business, etc. Early in the book he takes a relatively obscure community as an example. They are the inhabitants of a small town in the hills of northeastern Pennsylvania, called Roseto, near Bangor. The great majority of the people of Roseto come from its namesake village in southeastern Italy. A poor village at the turn of the nineteenth-century, most of the economy came from quarrying about an hour's walk from the village and, consequently, an hour's uphill slog at the end of a brutal day. When they heard of new opportunities in America a hundred years ago, a trickle of exiles over the decades turned into a steady stream.

I think it was in the 1960s that a physician noted an extraordinary commonality about the people of Roseto, PA. They all seemed to die of old age. Just that. Studies showed that heart disease was almost unheard of, where in the 1950s and 1960s it was the leading killer in people over 60 in the U.S. Scientists looked at the Rosetan's diet. They cooked daily with lard, so that wasn't it. In later studies they looked at

their genes, but people from Roseto, Italy who emigrated to other communities around the United States, shared precisely the same gene pool yet suffered the same incidence of heart disease and other illnesses as the rest of America. So that wasn't it. Then the researchers abandoned their spreadsheet data and took a walk around the little town. What they saw was a whole community that took time for each other, stopping on the street to talk, and keeping up with their neighbors as if they were family. The small town had over sixty civic organizations. The elderly were prized and honored. They built parks and playgrounds for families. Displays of wealth were frowned on. And there were no social hierarchies. People were nourished by other people.

Unfortunately, in the decades after the mid-sixties, all that changed as descendants were exposed to wider education and travel, those later generations became acculturated to the larger population. But what a lesson it sends—both in their success and ultimate decline—to all of us about the need to focus on simplicity and family. “Wisdom from above,” wrote the apostle James, “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

All these things are from God, in whose nature we are made. Yet we are not capable in our companion self alone (our human nature) of accessing this wisdom. Because our human nature attends to itself, so we feed the desires that are within. But the higher wisdom expresses itself by giving itself away. It flows outward to touch other lives. Notice that all its qualities are outflowing, they make no reference to the self: “peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits . . . a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”

This is the example that Christ taught in all things. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, the “wisdom [of God] is not in the head but in the behavior.” It begins when we turn away from self and in coming to God are confronted by our need to confess in the starkness of the contrast. Then, God cleanses us.

Happiness is not far from us, as Moses spoke in a recent text from Deuteronomy 30. This wisdom of God, he reminded us, is not in heaven, that we should send to have it brought down to us. Neither is it across the sea, that we should send someone for it there, to bring it back. It is very near, on our lips that we might speak it, and in our hearts that we might know it and be it. Amen.