

On Tuesday morning in the midst of time off, I found myself in a quiet space. It was raining, hard--you might remember? Marilee was driving up to Minneapolis to be with Brenna, our oldest, who was recovering from surgery. I had already been outside in the steady rain on that morning-- a liquid reminder of our two years of constant rain in Sitka Alaska. Rain was the norm.

On Tuesday, I decided to take a look at the texts for this Sunday. First there was Jeremiah, the forlorn prophet whose life is in real danger. He is feeling very isolated and very vulnerable and that too is part of the reality of being a prophet--aloneness and abandonment at times.

As I looked through the lectionary readings further, I came upon the wise counsel of James, our second reading. *Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.*

In this passage James is presenting to the Jerusalem church two kinds of wisdom. Envy and selfish ambition and the tendency to be "false to the truth" are a product of a wordly wisdom. This human wisdom found quite often in our society, James portrays as distinctly unspiritual. Contrasting this tendency to be selfish and competitive and full of self adulation, there is another wisdom, a wisdom from heaven, a wisdom--James says-- sent from God.

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. This righteousness that James mentions is a gift. It comes as a product of living a certain way. James says that this righteousness is a gift from Sophia, from Wisdom and in this regard, we should note that in the New Testament there is a tendency to directly identify wisdom with Jesus. Raymond Brown speaks of Jesus as *personified Wisdom* and another scholar, James Dunn, speaks of Jesus as *the exhaustive embodiment of divine wisdom.* Wisdom from above.... Wisdom

encountered in a relationship with Jesus in which we pay attention to his values, his agenda, his kingdom, his teachings. Wisdom can be an encounter with Jesus as personified wisdom.

But then I decided to sneak a peek at the Gospel text while the rain fell on a Tuesday morning. And here I encountered Jesus as Wisdom in action.

The lesson begins with Jesus sharing a profound truth, the truth that he is going to be betrayed and eventually killed. This is heavy, difficult material for Jesus to share. It no doubt has been a burden.

Maybe it is in response to Jesus' profound message--so difficult even to hear much less to accept--that the disciples respond by abandoning heavenly wisdom for earthly wisdom. They began arguing. The followers of Jesus become engaged in contentious conversation. A dispute about who is the greatest?

Our culture loves the question of greatness. Who is the greatest player on the Brewer's team? Who is the greatest QB in Packer history--present or past? Who is the greatest president in the history of the United States? Who is the highest paid worker? Who is the greatest?

And so the disciples stand there, in my mind at least, stand there on the dusty road gesticulating with arms raised, voices strident lost in a moment of self absorption and selfish ambition--shedding the wisdom from above and trading it in like a worn-out garment heading to the rag bin--trading in heavenly wisdom for devilish, earthly, spiritual foolishness--the kind of spiritual stuff that deconstructs harmony and peace.

Who is the greatest? Let me catalogue and list all the things I have done for the church.... Who cares most for the church? Who knows the most about the Bible, about the history of the Christian church through the centuries? Who gives the most money? Who spends the most time? Greatness --it seems-- and the desire to be great, and perfect always winds up wearing the satiny sheen of Pride.

One of the things we do almost on each and every Sunday when we gather is say a corporate prayer of confession, responding to the invitation that the priest provides-- *Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.* Then we say it. And on good days, perhaps we are able in the midst of it all to finger one or two things that we have in fact done--making our prayer more personal and more deep. And all of us do this together.

We begin by bowing down and together we seek forgiveness for things done and left undone. Including pride. Including perhaps boasting or selfish ambition or many other things. And then the priest stands and faces the group of people and proclaims forgiveness on the part of God whom we already have addressed as "Most merciful"-- The pardon includes forgiveness (The Lord forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ), a message of strengthening (strengthen you in all goodness--I like that part a lot), and finally preservation or--sustainability-- (keep you in eternal life).

Eternal life. Not eternal in the heavens, but here. Eternal in the midst of it all. Eternal life freeing us.

I have been reading a book by Rachel Held Evans entitled simply *Searching for Sunday*--with the subtitle: *Loving, leaving and finding the church.*

In one chapter, Evans began discussing what she calls "dirty laundry." She says: *The practice of confession gives us the chance to admit to one another that we're not okay, and then to seek healing and reconciliation together, in community. No one has to go first. Instead we take a deep breath and start together....*

This a sacred act--confession--and it begins internally when we face ourselves. But we do not want to know our weaknesses and our vulnerabilities, our hang-ups. We do not want to look. And so, when we do, grace arrives in the form of the Spirit to help us. Why do we always have to clean up for church? Walter Bruggeman, Old Testament scholar writes: *Churches should be the most honest place in town, not the happiest place in town.*

There are places in almost every town, often in church basements, that speak to this spiritual issue. People gather, share some strong coffee and perhaps a cookie or two and then begin: *HI. I'M JACKIE, I'M JOE; I'M FRED, I'M FLORENCE AND I'M AN ALCOHOLIC.*

There is a sacred spiritual act in telling the truth and also in being willing to listen to it. James says, "draw near to God and God will draw near to you." Telling the truth includes telling the truth to God--and perhaps it begins there.

All parts of our lives have edges and uncertainties, places of weakness, raw places of vulnerability. No one is exempt. And down in the church basement and at times also right here in church, people come face to face with those parts of themselves that are not powerful, not composed, not flawless. And they begin there to find new life--in the grace of simply being powerless.

Rachel Held Evans writes:

We Christians don't get to send our lives through the rinse cycle before showing up to church. We come as we are--no hiding, no acting, no fear. We come with our materialism, our pride, our petty grievances against our neighbors, We come with our fear of death, our desperation to be loved, our troubled marriages, our persistent doubts, our preoccupation with status and image. We come with our addictions--to substances, to work, to affirmation, to control, to food. We come with our differences, be they political, theological, racial, or socioeconomic. We come in search of sanctuary, a safe place to shed the masks and exhale. We come to air our dirty laundry before God and everybody because when we do it together we don't have to be afraid.

These words, too, are a call to confession. What an invitation.

But let us give James the final word:

17 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. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

In the name of God--Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.