

The St. John's Pulpit

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WISE OR OTHERWISE

James 3:13 – 4:10

September 30, 2018 Message 5 of 5 in Series Entitled,

'Actively Faithful Faithfully Active Living:

Learning to Live by Characteristics of God's Spirit of Love'

by Senior Minister, Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD



This past week, on our national stage, we saw how people can be wise or otherwise. What might a pastoral preacher choose to say after this kind of week? How might a congregation rise above extremist politics to bear witness of God's wisdom? How might we show others that we are in the world but not of it?

It is not breaking news to you that life involves both good and bad; every life is bittersweet. For example, by no fault of my own, I was born a white male in America. Though I cannot apologize for being a white male, I can use my influence on behalf of others. Some people are surprised to learn that burdens even accompany gifts of entitlement. Life is bittersweet.

A young woman wrote this prayer in her journal:

“Lord, thank You for my summer childhood memories on my uncle's ranch. There was space to run unhindered and freedom to explore. The dust on the road was as soft as powder and thick on the trails. I could run barefoot and pretend the dirt was beach sand between my toes. Fresh mint grew beside the creek and it was sweet to taste. The barn was my playground. Every animal was like a living toy. The hay offered a sweet scent and even the spiders and mice seemed friendly. I rode my cousin's palomino horse through fantasies that never seemed to end. We only stopped playing when we got a whiff of one of my aunt's berry pies. Yet, Lord, if I am not careful, I can edit those summer memories and forget the bee sting where I picked the mint or the many times I burned my tongue on a berry pie because I wouldn't wait. I could forget the awful smells in the barn or the reality that I sneezed all summer because of the powder dust on the trails. Lord, help me be wise enough to learn from both pleasure and pain. Amen.”

Life consists of both positive and negative experiences. The Scottish have a saying, *“Morning never wears to evening but what some heart is broken.”* The Spanish offer the same idea with, *“Each home on earth has its pain to bear.”* The Arabs say, *“All sunshine makes a desert. Wise is the person who acknowledges hardship can precede wisdom.”*

Randall Lolley, a friend of St. John's, experienced tremendous blessings and burdens through his life of ministry. After serving as Senior Minister of First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, Randall became president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1974. He resigned in 1987 under pressure from the fundamentalists and their mean-spirited politics and manipulations. He then served as Senior Minister of First Baptist Church of Raleigh and First Baptist Church of Greensboro.

During a challenging time, when fundamentalists were attacking him and others, Randall refused to retaliate saying, “*There is a Christian way to be human.*” Randall was bearing witness by saying, ‘no matter what happens to you, you get to choose whether you will live out the wisdom of God, as revealed in the character of Jesus.’

In a visit with Randall a few years ago, we spoke about pastoral preaching. He acknowledged the relational dimension of pastoral preaching versus preaching as a seminary president. He said, “*When I was a pastor, I knew the successes and idiosyncrasies of the people and they knew mine. Sunday would come, and I would try to have something to say; but there were other Sundays when I’d have to say something.*”

Today, it is my intention to have something to say; not merely say something.

Today, to victims of abuse, who often live with shame and confusion, be comforted; to women whose voices are often silenced by men who misuse power, be empowered; to men who have never and would never hurt any woman, man or child, be encouraged; to those who have expressed God’s wisdom when you have been mistreated, be hopeful; and to all of you – pursue God’s wisdom which lifts your thoughts above accusations, rancor, manipulations, blind immorality, and falsehood.

When one of our twin daughters died during the birthing process, my brother wrote a song entitled, ‘*Bittersweet Tears.*’ The lyrics included these words: ‘*One child lived and one child died; one child laughed and one child cried – Bittersweet Tears.*’

Bittersweet describes pleasure accompanied by suffering or regret.

John Claypool proposed that wisdom is gained by a series of bittersweet moments.

Throughout September, we have considered James’ words to the first century church challenging them and, by extension us, to seek God’s wisdom. Follow these scriptures. Listen to James’ words of wisdom, as he teaches how to live this bittersweet life.

In 3:13, James asks, “*Who is wise and understanding among you?* Then he challenges, “*Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.*” Although these words are two thousand years old, they are relevant today; they are poignant this week.

James was unimpressed by earthly wisdom and human understanding used to manipulate people. **The only wisdom that interested James – and the only wisdom that should interest us, is wisdom from above; wisdom that has nothing at all to do with having good ideas and has everything to do with Actively Faithful Faithfully Active Living.**

In 3:14-15, James tells you what you already know. His words apply to our both our national life and our religious witness which have become so politically infused and ideologically divided because of bitter envy, selfish ambition, boastful pride and a commitment to falsehood rather than Truth. These expressions have caused many people outside and on the periphery of organized church to see the Church as irrelevant. You already know – earthly wisdom works against God; it is unspiritual and devilish. Earthly wisdom is self-seeking, based upon elitism, pretentiousness, arrogance, immoral blindness, lying, hierarchical control, bending the rules, reshaping the truth, fear and institutionalized bigotry; it creates disorder and wickedness of every kind.

In 3:16-18, James says, *'The wisdom that is from God is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.'* Wisdom from God, when planted and nurtured, yields a harvest of righteousness and peace.

In 4:1-3, James tells you where conflicts and disputes among you originate? They grow out of the double-mindedness raging within you; your cravings and desires to have power, to be right and to be in control. You want what you cannot have so you are willing to hurt others or even destroy to have it. You do not have some of what you desire because you have not asked. And when you do ask, your motive is to satisfy your own pleasures.

In 4:4-5, James compares this way of double-minded living to adulterers; pursuing what seems right to a person who says they are committed to God – but investing in satisfying self-centered ambitions. James says that friendship with the ways of the world makes you enemies of God. In other words, in God's sight, you are Wise or Otherwise.

Once again, James tells you what you already know but often forget: *'God yearns jealously for God's Spirit to dwell in you.'* What if the person who says they love you wants to also have a committed relationship with someone else? God refuses commitments of adultery.

In 4:6-10, James instructs you to remember, *"God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourself to God*

Resist devilish ways and those devilish ways will no longer control you.

Draw near to Godly ways and God will draw near to you.

Cleanse your hands from your works of evil.

Purify your heart from double-mindedness.

Be sorrowful for your sin. Lament. Mourn. Weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning for your sinfulness. Let your joy be turned into dejection because of your shame.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, The Living God, and the Lord will lift you up."

In the song, *'Bittersweet Tears,'* my brother describes the bittersweet moment of Jesus' death and how, in his pain and suffering, humanity found a deeper understanding of love. Jesus' resurrection proclaims that God's wisdom always prevails in bittersweet living.

Most of you are familiar with the story Jesus told about a wise man and a foolish man building their dwellings; both experienced the blessings and the storms of the bittersweet life. Of course, the dwellings represented more than houses; they represented their lives. The wise man built upon the solid foundation of God's wisdom; the foolish built upon sand. Both had sunny and clear days while they were building.

Yet, when the storms happened, and storms always happen, one building stood and one fell. When that fellow was building his house on the sand, it was pleasurable for the moment. But, he wasn't looking to the future; he was focused on the immediate.

Later, he learned what everyone eventually learns: there are only two types of people; WISE OR OTHERWISE.

Beloved, through your Actively Faithful Faithfully Active Living, you follow God's wisdom. You show others that you are in this world but not of it!

There is a Christian way to be human. Let it be so! Amen and AMEN!