

Curbing Cravings: Yielding wisdom and good fruit

James 3:13-4:3; Mark 9:30-37

Curbing human cravings for power, for recognition and status, I think is an everyday struggle that we have. Our survival instinct is an important part of being human, but at times it does not serve us well. Our survival instinct is often reactionary. Not wisdom-seeking, not of a Christian flavour.

The passage from James today invites us to explore three questions. The first one: who is wise in understanding? Number two: from what do conflicts and disputes arise? And thirdly: what is it that God wants?

In our most recent statement of faith, called *A Song of Faith*, we, the United Church of Canada, proclaim that God wants the following:

“God made humans to live and move and have their being in God. God transforms and calls us to protect the vulnerable, to pray for deliverance from evil, to work with God for the healing of the world so that all might have abundant life.”

Are you ready and willing to ask the question: what is our purpose as people of faith? As I said in the fall, we were going to get back to basics. We talked about why we worship, we talked about what it means to be a church, and today the question is, what is our purpose as a people of faith? But I wonder: are you afraid to ask that question? And if so, is the fear that you might not be living up to God’s expectations? I believe that this is a real fear that all of us face at different points in our lives. We might also fear being wrong. What if I am not good enough or smart enough to understand?

As a child, I lived in perpetual fear that a teacher was going to ask me a question. I never made eye contact in hopes that they wouldn’t choose me; I tried to make myself as invisible as possible. I tried to look like I was listening and learning, and I was very masterful at suddenly having to take a note right at the moment when I knew they were going to ask a question. But I had this one teacher – my math teacher – who seemed to see right through me and would ask almost every single class, “Karen, what do you think?” At which point, I would turn beet-red, become like a deer in the headlights, freeze and my mind would go completely blank, and I

would mumble and stall in hopes that somebody else would save me, jump in and come up with the answer. And in the end, more often than not, I would say, “I don’t know.” Once I calmed down again, though, I found that I actually did know the answer – most of the time. Not always, but at least I was on the right track. But because I was so afraid of being seen as stupid, I wouldn’t answer the question.

It's often that our egos work against us. In the passage from Mark today, we see how that is being played out by disciples. After Jesus told them what would happen to him – that he would be betrayed by human hands and they would kill him and he would then rise again after three days – the disciples did exactly what I did. They were too afraid to tell Jesus that they didn’t understand. Their ego prevented them from seeking wisdom. Instead, they let their egos go wild and get in the way. They spent the rest of their time that day arguing with one another about who was the greatest among them, so when Jesus left, then they would be the next in line. But this is the earthly wisdom that James is speaking about. The disciples began to argue with one another out of selfishness, ambition, and craving. They wanted to be like Jesus – and who wouldn’t? Jesus had done some amazing things. Had impressed so many of us, and we were following him precisely because he was so amazing. Now to quote James:

“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 unearthly, unspiritual and devilish.”

So why are we, like the disciples, so afraid to ask our questions? Do we live in fear that people will discover that we don’t know everything about God? That we don’t know everything about Jesus, that we don’t understand what Jesus is saying and that maybe we doubt that we have enough faith.

I’ve often wondered over the years if, in fact, that teacher was actually trying to help me instead of picking on me. I truly believed they were picking on me for many many years. The answer is of course. Of course the teacher wanted to help me in that moment. Teachers want their students to learn. Teachers *want* us to ask questions of clarification. And there are times when, as teachers, we might not be explaining things very well. There are times as a preacher, I might not be explaining things very well and I would hope that you have the courage to ask questions of clarification, to say, “I don’t understand.”

I learned this lesson when I began youth ministry, which we have heard a little bit about today. I have had faithful followers ask me questions about something I have said, and it was in their question that it was clear that I didn’t explain things very well, because of what they were saying back to me. And I have truly learned more from those conversations than I ever have

from preaching a sermon. So I'm really glad that people have the wisdom and courage to talk to me and ask their questions.

Ministers and leaders in the church are not wise by virtue of their role. James reminds us that wisdom is shown by how you live your life. James explains that wisdom is gentleness, humbleness. It is pure. Peaceable, willing to yield, full of mercy, and without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. Jesus explained to the disciples that to be the greatest in his eyes and in the eyes of God, you must be last of all. You must be servant of all. And he goes on to say that whoever welcomes a child in my name is the one who welcomes me.

Wisdom isn't a contest. Wisdom doesn't simply exist in our heads and in our thinking. Wisdom comes when the heart and mind are at one. Wisdom is when our actions and thoughts align with one another. And wisdom sometimes is knowing that we don't know everything. God wants us to love, to be kind, to be equitable, and to share the abundance with all. James said, "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly." What does that mean? I'm sure we have all heard the statement, "There are no wrong questions." So why would James say this? It isn't that the question itself is wrong; it's the intention behind the question. And James has been speaking about this over the last several weeks: it is our intentions that matter. When we ask the question in hopes of personal gain or pleasure, that is when we are asking wrongly. Our wisdom earth, not from above. That wisdom comes from a place of selfishness, ambition, craving, coveting, and desiring what others have.

Let's go back to the first question: what is our faith about? The purpose of faith is to remind us to whom we belong. We belong to God. We are called to serve one another in love. We are called to show mercy, compassion, and share our love unconditionally with all people. We are also called to seek wisdom from above.

Stevie Wonder wrote a song that keeps popping up in my head called *Higher Ground*. In the chorus of the song, he thanks the higher power – in our context, God – for helping him and giving him an opportunity to try again. Doesn't Jesus give us an opportunity to try again every single day if we are forgiven? Stevie Wonder acknowledged that he lived in a world of sin, and then he says, "I'm so glad that I know more than I knew then. I'm going to keep on trying until I reach my higher ground." He says, "Teachers, keep on teaching; preachers, keep on preaching; world, keep on turning, because it won't be too long. Lovers, keep on loving; believers, keep on believing; sleepers, just stop sleeping, because it won't be too long. I'm going to keep on trying until I reach my higher ground."

As Christians, as people of faith, are we not called to reach that higher ground? That wisdom that comes from above, not from the earth. Jesus and James in these passages today remind us to not give up. To keep on trying, to keep seeking wisdom, and to keep asking the questions

until we can all live in a spirit of gentleness, humbleness, peace. Where we are willing to yield. Where we are full of mercy, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

I want to end this time with the last bit from our Song of Faith. We proclaim:

“We place our hope in God. We seek a sign of life beyond life and a future good beyond imagining. A new heaven and a new earth. The end of sorrow, pain, and tears. Christ’s return and life with God. The making new of all things. We yearn for the coming of that future, even while participating in eternal life now. Divine Creation does not cease until all things have found wholeness, union, and integration with the common ground of all being. As children of the Timeless One, our time-bound lives will find completion in the all-embracing Creator. In the meantime, we embrace the present, embodying hope, loving our enemies, caring for the earth, and choosing life.”

That is our purpose as faithful followers of Christ. So go out in this world and be the amazing people that God has created you to be. Seeking wisdom and asking the questions. Thanks be to God. Amen.