

18th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? 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. 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.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Today is perhaps the most simple sermon you've heard me preach so far. It is a sermon with a very simple message: gentleness is a virtue that is an integral part of the work of the gospel.

We live in a culture that equates gentleness with weakness. From the get-go, many of us, especially us men and boys, are told to tough it up, to "man" up, to stop crying, and to stop "throwing like a girl." We are inundated with rhetoric that tells us we must be tough on crime, tough on the border, tough on refugees. We have long been a country that promotes the false narrative that "might is right." There seems to be no greater evidence of this than the fact that we spend more on our military than the next several countries in the world combined, all of which, coincidentally, are allies.

Now, please don't get me wrong. Our military is not a bad thing. Strength and toughness have its place. But when we allow our obsession with such things to lead us to a place where we look upon the virtue of gentleness with disdain, then something has gone terribly off track.

Ironically enough, James is a "tough" book of the Bible. James does not hold back when defending the gospel as a lifestyle that demands us to embody it in word and deed. However, nestled within the feisty words of the Book of James comes this curious portion: "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom."

A gentleness born of wisdom. Friends, that might just be the most countercultural phrase in the Book of James.

In this passage, in this fourth week of our journey through this book of the Bible, James gives us a choice between two wisdoms. A wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish. And a wisdom that comes from above. On the one hand, a wisdom that is boastful and false and, on the other hand, a wisdom that is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

When we think of the Book of James, odds are the first thing most of us think of is the part where it tells us that “faith without works is dead.” However, one of my seminary professors, Mark Douglas, reminds us that, while this *is* a very important part of James, James is really about something even more broad. James is not so much about works as it is about wisdom, he tells us.¹

James lifts up for us a wisdom that is to be found in gentleness. And I’d like to lift up to you a few ramifications I think this has for us:

Having a gentleness born of wisdom means that we must reject all forms of toxic masculinity. We must reject worshipping the idol of toughness that leads many men to think they have dominion over women’s bodies. That is a perfect example of the devilish wisdom of which James speaks in today’s passage.

Having a gentleness born of wisdom means that we must reject the false narrative that in order for one person to win, another must lose. The gospel reminds us that this world need not be a zero sum game. In order for some to be strong others need not be weak. We can all be strong together if we share the love of Christ with one another in word and in deed.

Having a gentleness born of wisdom means that we must reject the false narrative that everyone has the ability to pick themselves up by their own bootstraps. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve heard people suggest that because someone else is not as “successful” as them it is because that person is some combination of lazy, irresponsible, and weak. This devilish wisdom is often the source of much of this country’s racism, classism, and sexism. Gentleness means understanding that other people have experiences different than yours and that no one person’s experience is universal.

But now let me share with you some things that a gentleness born of wisdom does *not* mean.

Having a gentleness born of wisdom does *not* mean that we allow ourselves to be doormats for other people to walk all over. A gentleness that tells someone in an abusive relationship to just roll over and take it is a perversion of the gospel. A gentleness that leads to apathy and passivity is clearly NOT what James is lifting up before us. A gentleness born of wisdom does not mean we don’t vigorously defend the gospel when it is under attack. It does not mean that we don’t get angry when we see injustice in the world. In fact, the gentleness of the gospel has a quiet and ferocious strength to it when you think about it.

The gentleness of the Gospel is what led Jesus Christ to submit himself as a sacrifice for all of our sins. Like a gentle lamb being led to the slaughter, Jesus showed a strength that literally changed the world. Although I’m sure the Romans were laughing at Jesus’ “weakness” as he died on that cross, they were whistling a much different tune three days later when they found that empty tomb.

Another example of what it means to be strong while being gentle is good ole Mr. Rogers. He was meek. He was mild. He was genteel. He was soft-spoken. And that dude changed the world! Mr. Rogers was

¹ From Feasting on the Word.

gentle, yes, but not weak. Mr. Rogers challenged social norms and used his television show to critique racism, violence, and other social ills.

I leave you today with this final observation. Today's passage, I believe, does not only encourage us to be gentle with others but also to be gentle *with ourselves*. It can be a really cruel world out there, and together we are working with Christ to change that, but first, we must be gentle with ourselves. And that's one of the most important tasks of the Church, to be a place where we gather to care for one another, to be gentle with and for one another.

So, friends, go out into the world to show that world that gentleness is not weakness. Go out into the world and choose the wisdom that lifts up gentleness, a gentleness that is even stronger than death.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.