

SERMON (by Rev. Irene Bom)

preached at Scots International Church Rotterdam on 19 September 2021

Be wise in God's eyes

James 3:13-18; James 4:7-8a

What does wisdom look like? How do you recognize wisdom when it crosses your path? Do you feel it in your head? In your heart? In your gut? Or is it a wholly spiritual thing?

What does wisdom look like? It's both abstract and concrete at the same time. Like so many Christian virtues.

Some years ago, when ELBS, the Evening Ladies Bible Study, was still active, we did a series on the fruit of Spirit. Each week we zoomed in on one of the nine facets mentioned in Galatian 5: love, joy, peace, patience, etc. Week after week I would raise the question – is there a gesture that clearly embodies this week's topic? How do you convey faithfulness or gentleness or self-control in a simple gesture? What about joy? For me, the typical gesture for joy is dancing around with your hands in the air. As joy bubbles up, you can't help but expand outwards.

So, what does wisdom look like?

If you were asked to illustrate the concept of wisdom, where would you start? When the Rubin Museum of Art in New York proposed an exhibition on the topic of Wisdom in 2016, Andrea Pemberton came up with a "Wisdom Matrix" to capture the web of interconnected "wisdoms" available to us as we move through the world — wisdoms of experience, of innocence, of instinct, of logic, of love, of intuition. (source: <https://rubinmuseum.org/blog/wisdom-graphic-designer-how-to-bring-ideas-to-life>)

On youtube there's a short video illustrating the "wisdom matrix" that Andrea Pemberton devised. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy_HnAptFSQ

It's intriguing to watch. In the video we see people at different stages of life, engaged in different kinds of activities. A toddler walking on a wet beach, a young girl in biology class learning about molecules, a woman exercising in the gym, a young couple on a date, people in voting booths on election day, a

skydiver jumping out of an aeroplane, a woman in a park, smiling as she lifts her camera to take a photograph. Each activity calls for a different set of "wisdoms".

Here are some of the ways wisdom shows up in the heart, mind and gut, mapped onto these different activities in Andrea Pemberton's video: Curiosity, reason, ethics, freedom, wonder, hope, spirit, meaning, aspiration, creativity, muscle memory and vision.

Wisdom is a many-splendored thing.

Who is the wisest person you know? How does their wisdom show up in the world? And how does that person's wisdom impact your life, making you wiser too? True wisdom is something to share, something we can build our lives on.

The ancients knew this. In the Bible we have a whole category of books known as wisdom literature, dealing with our human struggles and real-life experiences, a genre of writing that focuses on existential questions about God, humanity, Creation, and the nature of evil and suffering.

Wisdom literature was widespread in many cultures in the Ancient Near East, but by far the best-known are those that found their way into the Bible: Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.

The letter of James draws heavily on this wisdom tradition. This letter also shares many similarities with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 to 7. Gary Holloway, in an article entitled, James as New Testament Wisdom Literature, writes, "If the Sermon [on the Mount] is the wisdom of Jesus, then James takes that wisdom and applies it to a new generation." (source:

<https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1665&context=leaven>)

Here's how James introduces the topic of wisdom in Chapter 1. You'll notice, he's very practical, offering encouragement and advice, as well as mentioning possible pitfalls. He writes, "5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do." (James 1:5-8)

Wisdom is available to us all. We merely have to ask God for it and trust him that if we apply the wisdom we receive, not giving up half way, or giving in to doubt, then we will see a good outcome. Wisdom is for the long haul. We must be prepared for the long game, 'de lange adem'. There are no quick fixes in the realm of wisdom because wisdom goes deep and wide. It's about doing something in the present in a considered and sustained way that will have a favourable outcome in the long run for all concerned.

In Chapter 3 James takes another stab at promoting wisdom as a necessary and desirable quality in a Christian. Wisdom is our birth-right and our calling as children of the all-wise, all-knowing God.

James writes, "13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom." When we unpack this verse, it reveals a glorious cycle that begins and ends with wisdom: wisdom leads to humility, humility inspires humble deeds, humble deeds lead to a good life, a good life as a sure sign that wisdom and understanding are at work.

James chooses not describe the "good life" in detail, recognizing that people's life circumstances are very different. I'm a woman, a single woman, an older single woman. The particulars of my "good life" will be very different from yours, but wisdom, humility and deeds done in humility should be at the core of all our lives if we are to honour God.

What does wisdom look like? Ever practical, James knows that there is wisdom and 'wisdom' in quotation marks, fake 'wisdom' that has earthly, unspiritual, even demonic roots. James mentions in particular the fake 'wisdom' of 'envy and selfish ambition' that produce bitter, twisted fruit.

So, what does genuine wisdom look like? James spells it out for us in v. 17: 'the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.'

True wisdom, the wisdom that comes from heaven looks like Jesus: Pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

The more we let Jesus shape our lives, the wiser we will be. Pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Our second, very short reading from James 4, offers us very important guidance on to how we avoid the fake 'wisdom' and build our lives on the genuine article.

"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you." (James 4:7-8a)

I listen to a lot of podcasts, and sometimes stumble upon nuggets of wisdom that are worth implementing in my own life and sharing with others. Recently I heard Louis Giglio speaking about his book, *Don't give the enemy a seat at your table*.

Who is sitting at our table, speaking into our lives and giving us advice? The enemy with his fake 'wisdom' or Jesus, the way, the truth and the life?

We need Jesus at the head of our table, speaking the truth and inspiring and guiding us to be all God intends us to be. After all, he knows us best, and wants what's good for us, that good life that flows from wisdom, humility and humble deeds.

Consider some of the ways Jesus himself refused to give the enemy a seat at the table, when he was tempted in the wilderness, when he silenced the demons and refused to let them speak as he healed the sick and set people free from spiritual oppression, when he was praying in the garden of Gethsemane and later on the cross. Jesus gave the enemy no foothold; instead he submitted himself fully to the Father's will and God honoured Jesus' sacrifice by turning the cross of shame into an instrument of mercy for us all.

If you find yourself acting like an orphan instead of a child of the King, take back your table. Send the enemy packing and invite Jesus to take his rightful place.

- if we worry a lot
- if we feel defensive and insecure
- if we let experiences and other people define us
- if we are motivated by envy and selfish ambition
- if we've lost touch with who we are in Christ

It's time to take stock. Invite the Holy Spirit to shine his light, and ask Jesus to replace the lies of the enemy with his truth.

True wisdom affirms us as the beloved of the all-wise, all-knowing God. And true wisdom points us to Jesus, the Good Shepherd who loves his sheep and is willing to take on the enemy, and lay down his life for the sheep if necessary, so we may know "the good life" he has planned for us – in this life and the life to come.

Take back your table, and let Jesus be the one who sets the agenda and the tone of your life. Come near to God and he will come near to you.

What does wisdom, true wisdom, look like? It looks like Jesus, and all those who submit their lives to God in humility and trust day by day.

In Revelation 3:20 Jesus says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."

Let us invite Jesus to sit at our table and teach us how to be wise in God's eyes - pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Amen.