WISDOM HAS SHOUTED, NOW WHAT?

Scripture: Mark 9:30-37 & James 3:13-4:8

FOCUS: We are called to be those guided by Godly wisdom, those who move beyond the often destructive and foolish smarts of human logic.

Last week we talked about the difference between being wise guys and gals and being wise men and women. In our Old Testament text from Proverbs we were told that wisdom stands on the street corner and we entertained the idea that in fact wisdom stands all around us all the time, and calls out to be heard and to be heeded. The problem is that wisdom is often ignored, by all of us! Today I want us to again think about wisdom, a topic worth far more than two Sundays, but certainly worthy of back to back sermons. This morning I want us to consider how to distinguish wisdom form intelligence and what we are to do with wisdom, how we ought to be affected by it.

Who is the smartest person you know, or the smartest person of whom you have ever heard? The Guinness Book of World Records once had a category for this but has sense removed it. Interestingly enough over the past few years folks have begun recognizing multiple categories of intelligence and listing the smartest folks for each category. Of course what most of us think of when we consider measurements of intelligence is IQ and that is one of the categories generally included. But there are others like financial, artistic, scientific, philosophical and musical int4ellegence.

We all know folks who are of above average intelligence don’t we? And it really does make sense to recognize the various types of intellectual prowess. There are musical geniuses who cannot balance a checkbook and financial wizards who cannot read a note of music. There are folks who struggle to get by in the core subjects but who can create marvelous works of art with ease. Such folks often encountered with envy those in class who make straight As without ever studying, yet who struggle to draw an acceptable stick person.

So what makes one smart? Well, .as we have just seen, that depends on what kind of smart you are talking about. I was curious how the dictionaries defined smartness. According to those I checked people who are considered smart have a quick intelligence, and are shrewd, clever, sharp, witty and knowledgeable. It seems that those qualities could apply to all the various categories. When we think of smart people, our minds generally go to intellect and knowledge, facts and theory. Notice that few if any of the adjectives used to describe those thought to be smart are related to character.

Indeed some of the smartest people around are folks of bad character. You have to be pretty smart to successfully swindle people. Those folks who make millions sending out email scams are no dummies. And it requires a good deal of intelligence to manipulate folks for personal gain as so many in business and finance have done over the years. Bernie Madoff was not stupid, foolish, but not stupid. And while many successful and very smart folks are not particularly dishonest, neither are quite a few particularly generous or kind, rather they are simply self-absorbed.

Let’s turn our attention now to wisdom. What names come to mind when you think of wisdom? I would be willing to bet that for most of you, like for me, they are not the names of spectacularly famous or well-known folks. My list doesn’t include any movies stars, athletes or politicians. That is not to say there are not wise women and men in all those professions, but for the most part wisdom is not what makes them notable. It seems to me that most wise people are not spectacularly newsworthy or famous, especially by twenty-first century standards.

We have become a people enamored by the spectacular and obsessed with the flamboyant. Hardly a day goes by that even the evening news fails to chronicle the latest missteps or life events of someone rich and famous. Entire networks and thousands of websites provide every detail of the lives of actors, professional athletes and the opulent wealthy. We know when their babies are born, how their marriages have come apart, who they were last seen out with and what brushes they have had with the law. And as long as we keep watching there are plenty of folks out there just waiting to offer up the juicy details.

So who is on your list? Perhaps it is a dedicated teacher from long ago, or a generous neighbor. It might be a self-sacrificing parent, or a faithful colleague at work. Perhaps it is a special friend who always has a willing ear. By the world’s standards they may not be important, yet they are the folks who make a real difference in our lives. They may not be particularly well educated certainly will not have high IQs, great musical skill, financial success or brilliant scientific minds, but what they have is really more valuable than all that other stuff. Those folks in our lives we know to be wise are folks of character, real, honest, godly character and that is the mark of true wisdom.

The two scriptures we have read this morning remind us that it may not be such a bad thing that the names we come up with are not those whose faces are prominent in the media. The passages make clear the truth that godly wisdom is not about popularity or notoriety, nor is it about IQ or education or talent. Godly wisdom is reflected in lives marked by good works and gentleness. It is a sad fact that such is only rarely considered to be newsworthy. But it is our calling, not to be newsworthy, rather to be worthy of the grace of God which is poured out on all who truly seek to live as God’s people.

Did you notice how countercultural Jesus’ words to the disciples in the gospel lesson sound to our twenty-first century ears? It is one of those passages which is so familiar that we fail to be shocked by its radical message. We all know that Jesus said the first would be last. But do any of us live like we really believe it? Aren’t we a bit like the disciples? It is important to remember the context for this passage. Only days before the twelve had been witness to the awesome sight of the transfiguration. Three of them had been with Jesus on the mountain, had seen visions of Moses and Elijah with him in the clouds there. They had heard clearly the voice of God as it proclaimed that Jesus was indeed God’s son and that the disciples should pay close attention to his every word.

In today’s text Jesus spoke words to the disciples which should have knocked them off their feet. He had spoken of his suffering, death and resurrection. He had sought to have those who were his closest companions grasp the magnitude of what lay ahead. He had hoped to lead them to put aside preconceived notions and to finally get on board with his true mission. But we are told that they didn’t get it, they were confused, failed to understand what Jesus was talking about. Now confusion is not necessarily a bad thing, it happens to all of us. And what Jesus had to say didn’t make much sense based on what the disciples thought they understood about the nature of his kingdom. The problem here is not that they didn’t understand, the problem is that they didn’t ask.

I had never really thought about that one line in this passage before, but this week it jumped up and demanded to be noticed. They did not understand and were afraid to ask him. It seems to me that if God gave us inquiring minds, God intended that we use them. I am absolutely convinced that God is far more pleased by honest questions than by mindless acquiescence to whatever we are told by those who claim authority for themselves. Friends, if you never have any questions concerning your faith or matters of God’s kingdom, I would argue that you are not thinking about kingdom matters enough. This thing called the Christian faith is complex and at times confusing, especially if we seek to comprehend them armed only with our very mortal intelligence, with our smarts! By the standards of the world, using only human logic, some of it doesn’t make sense. No matter how high your IQ you will never be able to simply reason your way to a deep and abiding faith, for faith is a spiritual matter which transcends human logic. It requires wisdom. Please hear me clearly. I am not arguing that that faith is illogical, rather that it goes beyond logic. By all means use every ounce of your brain to understand matters of God’s kingdom, but then allow the Spirit to take you just a bit further.

A word of warning here. If you are going to ask the hard questions, as I encourage you to do, you must be willing to devote significant energy to discovering the answer. As any of us who have ever been assigned a research paper know, it requires significant effort to become fully familiar with any subject. So it is with the sometimes difficult aspects of the Christian faith. As we come with our hard questions we need to be willing to do our research, so to speak. Where do we turn? We turn to scripture, to intelligent and detailed reading of God’s Word. We turn to the writings of other Christians, we devote significant chunks of time to the listening side of prayer, and we talk to other followers. And as we do, we find answers, not always, but most of the time we find answers. So hear me say, it is OK to ask the questions. But beware; it takes real effort to glean the answers.

The disciples’ first mistake was failure to ask. I wonder if, at least in part, that was because they were unwilling to hear an answer they didn’t want to hear. Such is often the case I think when we fail to ask hard questions. We have an inkling that we know the answer, and it is not the answer we want to hear, so we choose to have no answer at all. The disciples couldn’t have helped hearing what Jesus had to say that day. He spoke clearly and without any hesitation. And he had said the same thing before. But what he had to say about the outcome of their common ministry didn’t match the disciples’ preconceived notions about how things would end. So they ignored the words, refused to ask what they meant, and began to argue among themselves about greatness, about their own greatness! They must have each laid out before the others what they considered to be their most significant accomplishments, hoping to convince their peers of their moral superior.

Later Jesus would ask what they had been arguing about. Embarrassed, the disciples said nothing. But Jesus knew. So he sat down, a silent indication by the customs of the day that this was to be a teaching moment, summonsed the twelve and said simply, ***“So you want to be in first place, do you? Well then go to the back of the line, choose to be last at the table. What’s more, don’t expect to be served, but be ever willing to serve.”*** Having offered that dramatic challenge Jesus then did something unthinkable. It does not sound all that radical to our western ears. We love kids, politicians seek out opportunities to kiss them, grandparents post their pictures on social media and carry pictures in wallets, we oh and ah as they are presented for baptism. But in first century Israel children were of no value, considered to be, at best, on a level with slaves. In the eyes of the world, children were of no value.

So Jesus picked up a child. The disciples would have been shocked. Then Jesus utters those amazing words about how welcoming children is the very same thing as welcoming Jesus and welcoming God the Father. What Jesus is saying to the disciples, and to us, is that when we serve others, even those society would discard, those the world tells us have no value, especially when we serve those the world ignores, we are serving God and serving Jesus.

It was shocking and it is still shocking. The world tells us that the smart thing to do is to look out for ourselves and perhaps for those about whom we really care. The world says, ***“Be smart, build your own empire, make your own fortune, create your own future.”*** The scripture from James we have read this morning says, that kind of thinking may seem smart, but it is of the devil, it is not godly and it is not wisdom. The author writes, ***“Where there is envy and selfish ambition, you will inevitably find discord and evil.”*** He goes on to say that conflict and confrontation are the only logical outgrowth of our inward selfishness and greed. The world says, it is smart to look out for number one.

But God is not looking for smart folks, God seeks out and uses the wise, those of all IQ levels, the educated and the illiterate, the talented and the not so talented, folk from every walk of life, who are willing to put aside selfishness, who are unconcerned about status and who seek to gain and be guided by wisdom from above, folks who open there ears, their hearts and their minds to wisdom as she stands at the center of our everyday lives and cries out for attention. And having heard her cry what ought our lives to look like? They ought to look nothing like all the stuff we see on TMZ or Hollywood Tonight or even the national news. James tells us what wisdom from above, and that is the only real wisdom, looks like, it is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and devoid of hypocrisy. Hear that list again, this time as Peterson puts it in The Message paraphrase. ***“Real wisdom, God’s wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced.***

We can’t all be incredibly smart, we are not all equally talented, but by God’s grace we can all be wise. James tells us that God will grant grace to the humble, to those who submit to God, who resist the devilish desire to be smart and clever. God’s grace will accrue to those who have clean hands and pure hearts, to those who chose to temper intelligence with a good dose of godly wisdom. For your sake, for the sake of those the world tells us to ignore and for the sake of the kingdom of God, let it be so in your life. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.