

CONTRASTING AMBITIONS

JAMES 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; MARK 9:30-37

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National Public Radio reported last week that the “AOL” is being dropped from the “Time-Warner” as the official designation for the media giant. Seems that “AOL” is no longer attractive or profitable from a marketing standpoint.ⁱ

Not that long ago when AOL bought Time for \$112 billion things were different. It was another episode of corporate intrigue, boardroom politics, and executive maneuvering.

Old players were out, new players were in. Folks from AOL were calling the shots, positioning for power. Then things started to unravel. AOL has fallen on hard times. Financing of the merger is now under investigation. New leaders are emerging. Hardball in the big leagues.

Rewind 2,000 years. Things haven't changed much. Jesus and his companions are making their way through Galilee. They are the leaders of a new movement. Large crowds greet them wherever they go. Their stock is running high.

Then something goes awry. Their leader starts talking nonsense. Tells them he will suffer and die. He is clearly distracted from their marketing strategy. Seems bent on self-destruction.

A few of them get into conversation, debate who the new leader of the movement will be once Jesus is gone. Any responsible board-member serves the common good. Any clear-headed cabinet member would see the need for a succession plan. But who shall succeed? A quick comparison of resumes ensues. Backroom politics. Street-wise, worldly-wise hardball.

But what the disciples are oblivious to is a much larger reality. I have a cartoon at home. It pictures a fisherman sitting in his lawn chair, beer in one hand, fishing pole in the other blissfully watching the bobbing line in the water. What he doesn't realize is that he and his chair and bucket of worms are sitting on the back of a really large, half-submerged fish with a menacing look on its face.

So those disciples are unaware of the scope of Jesus' vision. He is not some spiritual guru dispensing advice for people regardless of their commitments. He is no Kahlil Gibran giving spiritual insights to the masses. Rather He is Lord of the universe teaching his chosen and commissioned followers – even though they often fail to get it.

Jesus wants more than a puny rebellion against Rome. He is after the source of all suffering and deceit.ⁱⁱ And the only way to get there is to expose the spiritual/moral bankruptcy of the wisdom of this world by subjecting himself to it, by inviting and teaching his followers to learn a new kind of wisdom, a new kind of leadership. Jesus aims to bring about far more than political change. He aims to bring about the transformation of the human family, the transformation of you and me. Contrasting ambitions.

Turn to the letter of James. If Jesus' aim for himself and his followers is to show the world the way to a better life, a whole life, the wisdom James offers is how to get there.

Who is wise and understanding among you? he asks. Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.... 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.

Who is wise? What is wisdom? Relevant questions. It is usually in times of need, times of crisis when I have heard you ask, just as I have asked in the crises in my life, "how do I relate my faith to the intense focus of what I am going through right now?" The need for wisdom and understanding.

When we face a crisis – when the stakes are high – we want to know how to get it right. How to move through threatening reefs and shoals of life safely and unscathed. The search for the wisdom that begets a good life.

A colleague tells the story of how he was scheduled to preach in New York City. Not long before the trip he received a letter from a young man raised in the church he served. The young man wondered if when his pastor was in town he might meet and have lunch with what he described as "some of us trying to make it in the theater arts here in New York wondering how our faith can sustain us."

When the pastor arrived for the appointed meeting he discovered not a handful of aspiring actors, singers and dancers but over 250 young men and women in their mid-twenties struggling with their faith at that demanding, difficult point of their careers.ⁱⁱⁱ

My hunch is not a few of us are here today because we are searching for wisdom. If it is a crisis of life that motivates you to seek wisdom this morning consider yourself in good company. And if you are on this quest just now without the some threat to what you hold dear consider yourself blessed.

Lord knows our city needs some special wisdom. The fiscal control board is doing its job. The job that years of patronage, party politics and the wisdom of this world prevented us from doing. The mayor's bare bones budget had too much fat. Back to the drawing boards. Meanwhile the prospect of no kindergarten, arts, music or sports in our public schools is very scary.

Likewise our nation is in need of wisdom from above. Daily reports of soldiers killed in Iraq is heartrending. Not only because the reality of war results in death. But there is a growing number of us who question our being in Iraq in the first the place. Superpowers especially need wisdom.

Wisdom is fundamental to life. If we tell ourselves we do not need wisdom from above or someday when we have time we will pursue such wisdom we are kidding ourselves.

Last week Carol and I went to Pittsburgh to celebrate the career of our dear friends Davd and Ann McFarlane. We were hosted by members of the congregation – a young couple with two young children.

We could tell immediately our hosts were special, gracious people. Uncommonly humble for a family who seemed to have everything.

In the backyard of their 11.5 acre estate Leslie told us about her company. Started ten years ago with one partner and six employees today she is CEO of a firm that employs 153 people. Contracts span the globe from Kazakstan to New Zealand to Brazil. Key players in the Mobil/Exxon merger. She returned from London the day before we arrived.

As we got acquainted over our brief stay we also learned that a few years ago they lost an infant daughter to a rare disease on Christmas Eve. Not church goes, a neighbor called The Presbyterian Church in Sewickley where our friends the McFarlanes served. One of the pastors came to the house immediately. After the midnight service David arrived to be with them.

Their life was on hold. Things that used to give pleasure were now meaningless. Old categories didn't work. The old formula for success didn't apply. Then they came across a copy of Harold Kushner's *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Slowly the healing began. The missing piece Leslie said was understanding how God fit into their experience or rather, she said, how we fit into God's purposes. Wisdom from above. Today they are active church members, leaders in a network of parents who've lost children reaching out to newly grieving parents and every Christmas Eve they lead a celebration for the staff at Children's Hospital.

Sometimes we think we have enough or know enough to live life the way we want to but then life intervenes and we find ourselves searching for a special kind of wisdom. Nor does it have to be significant loss. Our need for wisdom can surface in a gnawing malaise. What the monks used to call the "terror at noon" the time when there are no shadows, when life should be rosy and happy.

This kind of depression and fear are often manifest not in the down and out but in the gifted and strong. Those living at high noon on a sunny day. When as one preacher says, the magnificence of achievement results in the poverty of desire.^{iv} What's it all about? Is that all there is? Why go on?

Wisdom from above is fundamental to life.

The biblical word for wisdom is sophia – the feminine personification of wisdom. Reminds me of H.L. Mencken's quip "no matter how long he lives, no man ever becomes as wise as the average woman of forty-eight." Sophia!

Wisdom evident in a life well lived. One of the best stories I read this summer was the Pulitzer Prize winning *Crossing to Safety* – about the lifelong friendship of two couples. Apparently, the author Wallace Stegner, was as fine a human being as he was a writer. In the introduction long time Stegner friend says this, she says, Wally and Mary Stegner "made me want to live a dignified life, a life that mattered to the place and people where I belong and that each of us has obligations to both."^v An obligation to live large and not small, to speak out if that is needed or quietly hold a hand if someone is hurting, to follow where the Spirit leads. Wisdom for living. You recognize it a mile away.

Wisdom from God is a gift. Through me, says Sophia, God created the world and keeps the world on course. By me nobles lead and princes rule. James has a litmus test: pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality or hypocrisy.

But the Bible is clear. To find God's wisdom there is a spiritual quid pro quo: submission. The first must become last. Become childlike in trust, says Jesus.

Submission was not a popular concept in Jesus' time nor is it in ours. We like to think ourselves as rugged individualists. We often use the power and privilege at our disposal to get what we want. We do not worry much about the underclass.

But the submission Jesus and James talk about has less to do with submission to structures of authority than it does to the possibility of trust in a Higher Power.

The kind of submission, the kind of trust that leads a person to say, "OK God I've run out of answers. What do I need to learn? How do I need to grow? Where do I need to change?"

Such trust as James rightly says and as our Sewickley hosts Leslie and Matt will tell you can leave you feeling vulnerable and exposed. But it can also be counted on to drive the devil away and draw you close to God.

You can tell when you encounter someone living by such trust. There is a sense of the sacred for all that is; a deep reverence for life. And this: when you join your story to God's story you learn it doesn't all depend on you. There is a larger purpose and direction and flow to life.

When you get down to it there are two kinds of ambition and two kinds of wisdom: the ambition and wisdom of the world that can leave you high and dry even on a sunny day. And the ambition and wisdom of God that you can trust unequivocally.

One leads to despair.

The other, says the Bible, gives abundant life. Amen.

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endnotes:

ⁱ I heard this report the week preceding the sermon on NPR.

ⁱⁱ William Willimon, "God's Word to the Wise," from Pulpit Resource, July to September 2003, 49.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred B. Craddock, sermon preached at the Chautauqua Institution, summer 2001.

^{iv} Craddock, 2001.

^v Terry Tempest Williams, taken from the Introduction to Crossing to Safety by Wallace Stegner, (New York: Modern Library, 2002/1987) xvii.