

Sermon for First UCC, Northfield, MN

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**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.

May the words of my mouth

And the meditation of all our hearts

Lead us from wonder and curiosity into the very heart of the Mystery.

“Resist the devil and the devil will flee from you.” This got hold of me. Even though I don’t much like devil talk. I don’t care for the dualism of Us v Them; Light v Dark; Good v Bad; Man v Woman; Democrat v Republican. . . or any other number of enshrined either/or ways we often frame our lives. All this devil talk gets us self -righteousness and arrogance, from comical online preachers to horrifying violence towards the presumed damned. So maybe this verse itself – and the devil therein- needs the resisting?

Yet it persisted and it continues to grip me for some reason. Speaking to me from this letter from James which usually cues up for me a fight among the earliest Christians about what to do after their charismatic leader Jesus is executed. The apostle Paul’s group vs. the “men from James” as he calls them elsewhere. Paul never hung out with Jesus and was always proving his credentials. The followers in Jerusalem knew

Jesus. Healed with him. Anointed him. Some New Testament scholars argue that this James is Jesus' very own brother writing to us as head of the church in Jerusalem, though the text itself doesn't identify the author and the Greek is a bit snazzy for a rural Galilean. The letter seems to contradict Paul's emphasis on justification by faith over works/deeds. This one sounds like works works works.

It's definitely a moral treatise on how to behave in a way of Love. It could be on the Barnes and Noble shelf as self help guide- 10 effective habits of spiritual people. Luther didn't care for James much so it often gets read today in Lutheran circles as too focused on works, as if our good works get us closer to God and not our faith. People think they can earn heaven instead of trusting solely in the mercy of God. It's often read against Roman Catholics- they think they can say 10 Hail Marys, grab a quick bite of communion and get out. As if sustained spiritual practices in community wouldn't make a faithful habit of care for ourselves and our world. Or against Jews - with their obscure practices and laws. As if living where we honor our fathers and mothers, don't covet our neighbor's stuff, and think deeply about where our food comes from (maybe we shouldn't cook a creature in the milk its mother made to sustain it) are all incidentals to the order of a faith-filled life. I read James here as telling us to renounce this division and sanctimony. To use our energy more wisely.

So what the devil does the devil have to do with all this?

“Resist the devil and the devil will flee from you.  
Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.”

This feels deeply psychological. It's behavior modification meets ultimate understanding of the universe. If we can resist the devil/the Adversary, he will shrivel up, or flee, or shapeshift and find his/its way to another unsuspecting victim. For “devil” we can ditch the image of red suit and pitchfork of Halloween and talk about the Adversary, as he's often named... that rebel who thwarts the full energy and power of God working in the world. This is the one pictured in the bible story of Job, if you remember that story that goes a little something like this. The devil tests (even if ironically) whether humans can be good without expecting something in return. Or think of the devil as the Tempter in chief of the early Christian desert fathers and mothers. They fled to the desert from the city that was the capitol of the empire, to get out of the abuse of power and consumerism. There in their hunger, thirst, and meditations they ran into either their own tendencies to judge one another, or the obsession with food or sex, or even the tendency to elevate Scripture above Godself. They called that the devil. Whether it was an external power or an internal one, it vexed them.

What holds YOU back? Interrupts your quest for the meaningful, joyous life? What agitates and stirs you up so that it misdirects your energy? That seems to be what he's after. Show by what you DO – by your good works/actions- that you act from Wisdom. We can put our attention to what matters.

This is what Christ followers through centuries have assured us: if we meditate on the Divine, renouncing distractions or inhibitors of the Holy, we can draw near to God, however we envision that God/Force/Love/Wisdom. And here, James promises that if we draw near, God will draw near too. It's reciprocal. Mutual. Heck of a promise.

We can redirect our gaze from devilish *so-called* wisdom to a “wisdom from above.” And he goes on to tell us exactly what that wisdom is like? Here's the list. See if you'd care for some:

Pure

Peaceable  
 Gentle  
 Willing to yield  
 Full of mercy and good fruits  
 Without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy  
 Sown in peace  
 For those who make peace

It's a good gig this wisdom. And here we remember that the earliest Jesus traditions depict Jesus himself as Wisdom. Or Jesus herself since they gender God's Wisdom as female. Jesus as Mother makes a big showing in the Middle Ages for example.

The last five years or so have been full of conflict among people, and within people. Right? James names this tendency to be at war within and among humans. He reminds me of that saying that we have two wolves in us- evil and good. Now, which one do we feed? That one grows.

He perceptively marries internal, psychological struggles with external ways they show up in our communities, in families, churches and nations. James says "show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom." **Draw it down into you. Radiate that energy.**

This "drawing down" in order to renounce distractions is also a powerful practice. I don't know if you all have been running into this in your worlds but my life lately seems full of the language of "manifesting." My social media, my good friends who are teachers and social workers, even the graffiti under Hwy 94 on my way to the St Paul's farmers market all are talking this power of "manifesting" to me. It's like that new vocabulary word you learn and then suddenly it is everywhere. Manifest a new career. Manifest greater contentment. Manifest Love to the broken. It's a practice, I'm told. It requires training. Wisdom training. And stay with me here, I don't think it's crazy to see it akin to this ancient wisdom we read in Scripture.

Like much deep applied wisdom that has moved me in the last decade the idea has root in Black women's empowerment. These women, or "Conscious Creators" invite all people to take accountability over our lives, to name the powerful roles we play in their own lives rather than unintentionally give that to others. They call us to listen to the Ancestors. (James goes for Abraham, Rahab, and others- who do you go for? Grandma? Great auntie? Uncle Fred?) This is a spiritual practice that builds over time, consistency, with honest evaluations, clear corrections and apologies when we've wronged someone and new behaviors to live with intention and dedication to the vision of life. See <http://blackgirlwhomanifests.com/> or the *Ebony* magazine covers how to "manifest the life you desire." <https://www.ebony.com/life/self-help-desires/>

We all know when we make things harder than they need to be. Resist that devil. Turn towards Wisdom. They say recognize that and become clear about what WE want. Center in that Wisdom. It's a law of attraction. That like attracts like. Love attracts love like the Song of Songs says, flashes of fire! Don't spend our energy on what interrupts our vision, instead direct our energy and resources to *becoming* our vision. Feed the right wolf. The universe vibrates and if we give attention to what we desire, we will attract a more fulfilling life of abundance. This isn't the same as saying there is a Prime Director out there dictating everyone's actions. It's saying attune yourself to the universe. If you're pushing hard against something and its not working, stop resisting. Persistence may mean re-envisioning and taking another pathway. It's a

way of reprogramming our consciousness to change our reality. And it is acknowledging that thoughts, ideas stories work to do that.

It's a tantalizing promise that we can flee the devil to reprogram ourselves into the very Wisdom of God?

\*Trust the process

\*Raise your vibration

\*Don't be afraid to receive and acknowledge signs from the universe.

When we manifest we co-create with universe. (To quote Oprah, not James) Let go of resistance or limiting beliefs. Checking our energy- because the energy we put out is the energy we get back.

But you know who else talked about co-creating with the Creator of the universe by aligning with Wisdom? The Bible. The books of Wisdom, Proverbs, John, James. Somehow the Wisdom born into the world can subvert damning powers of injustice and death. It can be counter intuitive. We can birth it within us? Have we ever heard of such a thing? I think we have...Merry Christmas.

So back to this little letter of James.-He cares a lot about behavior but he avoids the abstract, esoteric Wisdom teaching. This is JUST DO IT kind of teaching. If you say you have faith in this Wisdom Sophia Jesus but don't act like it, then you ain't got it. Stylistically the letter is a diatribe. It's vivid with rhetorical questions and exclamations. It could totally be a twitter account in our day.  
#faithwithoutworksisdeadjesusbros

But ultimately it's about living consistently with one's own principles, in James' time as in ours, creating a beloved community after the Incarnate one appears gone. It's about doing good works because they necessarily and unrelentingly come from being aligned with a God of Justice and Love. They don't create the connection with God, they're the result of it. Conjuring the faith in the Abundant One makes all the works of justice and **joy** possible. **Resist** the old enemies that interrupt your full, flourishing life in God. **Manifest** God's Power of Love.

One worry I have about this practice is that it can shame those who aren't having success right now suggesting it is their own fault. Not manifesting your ideal job? Well why have you been preventing that? Not manifesting true love? what are you putting out into the world? There are many material actual things that prevent people from getting their full desires. Redlining to keep Blacks out of housing is not because Black homebuyers did not want to live in great neighborhoods with excellent services. Or mass displacement and murder of indigenous peoples was not because they didn't manifest antidotes to colonizers. Sexist policies of removing healthcare or salary inequities keep work environments unjust. These are all dangers that must be warded off like the very devils they are.

Renounce them and their evil ways. Renounce anything that distorts mental and physical health. Instead, summon a different Wisdom. **Because we are created for JOY.** We should control the things we have the power to control, starting with our own thought, talk and action. Don't say one thing and do another. Don't slander and judge. James slays the rich. They get their money by keeping back wages of laborers etc. If you preach generosity but don't pay your frontline workers, you have welcomed the Adversary. You aren't manifesting, calling God to you. Where we set our attention and give our energy is our path. We say simply, we are no longer available for that.

We can be fierce AND gentle. We can summon God by invoking peace. We draw to ourselves the very things we seek. This Wisdom craves relationship and as we manifest it, we *become* it.

Sometimes my ardent leftist urgency can usher in more call *out* culture than calling *in* the Spirit. James gives seasoned redirection. There are always do-overs and our communities are never entirely “pure” or “without sin.” It’s not a binary. A simple either/or. Keep self-compassion, but fiercely.

So I guess it doesn’t surprise me so much that this same message is popping up all over the place. No surprise that if I attune myself to the universe, and listen carefully, I might hear something that’s been there all along, in ancient forms and modern versions. That this Wisdom or Word can be eternally birthed, eternally made manifest in us- well, that’s the promise isn’t it? So this year I’m going to be more intentional about this practice. I hope maybe some of you will too and maybe we can share some of the nuggets that emerge as we do this together. We can commit to the practice of making Divine Wisdom manifest among us.

We can:

- Be clear about what we want, be intentional, thoughtful, discerning
- Practice gratitude and radical kindness
- Address our limiting beliefs that hold us back and renounce them
- Trust the process of grace
- Raise our vibration. This sounds a bit woo woo, but don’t we all want to vibrate with the energy in the universe, feel aligned and have Love emerge from us in concrete actions?

We can be bold. Unafraid, undaunted, and ready to receive and acknowledge signs from the universe. Let’s, friends. Let’s.