

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 23, 2018

Text: James 3:13-4:10

Theme: “Puffed Up or Lifted Up?”

How are you wired? We are all wired differently in our personalities, talents, and interests. What one finds interesting another finds boring or almost painful. Some of us like to work on things, fix them, others are ready to just find a replacement when something breaks. I’m more of a fixer, or at least an attempter in fixing. This has been my bent for as long as I can remember.

I remember trying to fix our lawnmower when it was not running probably when I was a teenager. My dad didn’t mind if I made such attempts, well, within reason. On this occasion I thought maybe the fuel line was clogged so I disconnected the line from the fuel tank and from the carburetor and put the one end to my mouth to blow through it. I didn’t realize the other end was turned back toward me, right up to my eye. So I blew and it was not clogged and I received a real eye full. It burned and I washed it out with water. It scared me more than it hurt me. I had another bad experience with gasoline around that same time. I siphoned some gasoline out of the car to fill the tank for the mower. We didn’t have one of those nice siphons with a hand pump on it. We just had a section of rubber hose. You created your own vacuum. I created a little bit too much that day and swallowed a little gasoline. I had a bad case of gas for the next couple of hours, burped up gasoline vapors, probably could have breathed fire if you had struck a match.

But back to the wire. This second story is really not to the point, tangential. We are wired differently, but yet the same. We share a wiring pattern like that gas line, turned inward. And just like with the gas line trouble results. We and those around us can get

burned. Ever since the Fall we think we know more than we actually do, and we think we are stronger than we really are. This curved back in alignment convinces us we are more important and wiser than many if not most around us. It's a problem that James addresses.

Our text begins with the words, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" This follows the section about tongue taming that we looked at last week. You would think the wise and understanding would know about tongue taming and that it would show. James tells us where to look for it. "By his good conduct let him show his works of meekness of wisdom." (3:13) But many of James words that follow indicate conduct was not always crying out wise and understanding. He speaks of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in the heart (3:14). He writes of quarrels and fights. This is pretty serious business. He says, 'You desire and do not have, so you murder.' (4:1) Really, murder, end the life of your brother or sister? That has happened, but we know you can kill with your untamed tongue. We know that this aim to harm, hate of the brother, starts in a murderous heart.

James says, 'You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel (4:1). People are getting hurt, poking and jabbing one another. It's the same as what Paul writes in Galatians 5:15, "But if you bit and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another."

So what's the problem? James says, 'You do not have because you do not ask.' (4:2) Why would you not ask, maybe because you think you are high and mighty enough to make it happen on your own, or maybe because you don't want to come to grips that what you are wanting is wrong. But maybe you do ask, you ask and do not receive. God knows your heart. He knows if you are asking in the wrong way, asking not for your needs, not for the good of the neighbor, but asking because you want to feed your passions (4:3).

But there's something common between the not asking and the asking wrongly. It's a puffiness, this wisdom or understanding not from above, but that which is earthly, unspiritual, even demonic—ouch! It is the that of reaching up. It's not a new bent. It is the same reaching up exhibited by those building that tower on the planes of Shinar who wanted to make a name for themselves. The apostles were afflicted with it. We see that as they argue about who is the greatest among them (Mark 9:34). Pokemon (short for “pocket monsters?”) has been around for quite a few years. Poke a man, or woman, or whomever is in the way has been around much longer, be on the scene ever since Satan convinced the woman she could be like God, and the man joined in the boast and the lie.

We are afflicted by it. Each of us is wise and understanding in the way of me at the expense of you. This reaching up from below, acting on self-interest, even self-omniscience has resulted in a lot of poking. There is bitter jealousy, self-ambition, friendship with the world (love of the things of this world for me). These things are of the same spirit, the me bent. And it has led to disorder and every vile practice. This attempt to lift up self with the inner bent comes back to poke me, poke you. In the end there is no lifting up only bringing down. Is this not what you would expect from what is earthly, unspiritual and even demonic?

James speaks of a much more desirable wisdom, that from above. Who is wise and understanding above all? Micah, no, that answer is not Micah that prophet who was a contemporary of Isaiah, the one who tells us the Son of David will be born in Bethlehem. But his name is helpful here, Micah, “who is like Yahweh?” We read in Psalm 113, “The LORD is high above all nations, and His glory above the heavens! Who is like the LORD (MicaYaweh) our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?” (vs 4, 5) In Isaiah 40 we learn the nations are like a drop in the bucket or but dust

on the scale compared to the LORD (v 15). The inhabitants of the earth are like grasshoppers. He has stretched out the heavens like a curtain (Isaiah 40:22). In Proverbs 8:22 we learn wisdom was the beginning of the Lord's works.

No, we are not in control at all. He is. He is the Omni One. We are the lowly ones. We might think we can exert our ways from below, make our plans and do our thing. In James 4 we read, "Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." <sup>15</sup> Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." <sup>16</sup> As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil."

James speaks of those putting themselves in opposition to God. Who would try that? James says friendship with the world is enmity with God. Make yourself a friend of the world, this from below wisdom being the driving force, then you set yourself up as an enemy of God. This is not wise, makes no sense, but the old nature is not known for good sense.

But the good news is God yearns for restoration, always has. It has been so since the first human attempts in lifting up, puffing up, from below. He didn't cut off, or push down and crush. He reached down, come down to save. As we look around and see all the wounded pokers around us and look at ourselves, it's not the time to say, "I'm bent, but not as bad as he is, no, it's time to look down in repentance.

Yes, the all wise and all understanding One reaches down to us, reaches down to save us from the world, from the devil, and from ourselves. The wisdom from above comes in His Son as nowhere else. Again James writes that this wisdom from above is if first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good works, impartial and sincere. We see all this in Jesus and we see His work going right through the cross, which

to the wise of this world looked more like foolishness. His is the greatest work of mercy. He is impartial, no distinction in persons, His work is for all. His work is pure and it brings peace.

In our Gospel lesson He tells the apostles what is about to happen, but they don't understand. No one has the wisdom to understand apart from the Spirit. Without the Spirit it is all folly. But the Spirit opens our eyes, our hearts to believe that it is God for us, God in our place. So great is His love for us that He takes the judgement of His justice for our sins in our place.

He came to destroy the work of the devil. He came to save us from our turned inward predicament. We were dead in our transgressions and sins, but now we are made alive in Christ. We have been redeemed from the futile way of life handed down to us from our forefathers. We have died to this pecking and poking order of sin to serving one another as we walk after our Lord.

It's time to get low, to humble ourselves. James lays it all out before us and he certainly doesn't hold back. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." (James 4:7-10)

We receive through faith the wisdom above here below. We were buried and raised with Jesus in Baptism. It's in Him that we are saved and in Him we now walk. We stay in Christ as we feed our faith receiving Him in His Word and His Supper. When we walk outside of Him, the old natural inner bent cause more trouble.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let Him show his works from his good conduct in gentle wisdom.” (vs 13) As you have heard me say before, the life of walking after Christ is not one trying to show off, but it certainly shows. Our lives in Him are not controlled by selfish ambition or bitter jealousy, not this below bent in stuff. The life of service we lead in Jesus will show in the lives of others. They will benefit from our service. Jesus tells those apostles who were acting from jealous and selfish ambition, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” (Mark 9:35) Those serving in such a way receiving the needy are actually receiving Christ. (Mark 9:37)

Yes, we are wired differently, but the same. We were all wired from conception with the inward bent, a life of frustration walking in the wisdom from below. But we have been rewired in Christ, now the wisdom from above to guide us here below knowing Christ is preparing a place for us above. In His Name. Amen