

Yr. B, Proper 20
September 23, 2018
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1415 Words

Lessons: **Jeremiah 11:18-20**
****Psalm 54****
****James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a****
****Mark 9:30-37****

“Who is wise and understanding among you?” James asks his congregation. He already knows the answer. The question is rhetorical. It’s a set up! The brother of our Lord wants to challenge *every* member of his congregation to—(quote)—“Show by your *good life* that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom”...not selfish ambition.

Grasping for ‘the good life’ with selfish ambition is profoundly different from *sharing* a good life, gently and peaceably like a tea olive shares its fragrant scent and dazzling beauty.

Elizabeth had a fragrant scent and a dazzling beauty. She was *the* most beautiful girl in high school, and everyone knew it. She probably knew it too, but she didn’t *act like it*—and this only enhanced her beauty even more.

There’s a lot to be said for cultivating our *inner* beauty, regardless of how we appear on the surface of ourselves. The world sells us trillions of dollars of products and services to enhance our superficial beauty, over which we have only partial control. And yet, we have full control—and *free control*—of our inner beauty according to the letter of James.

Why do we choose to neglect all that power? Why do we forfeit the very gift that is free of charge? “Wisdom from above,” according to St. James, “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

Elizabeth *chose* to be kind and gentle. She walked through the hallways of high school, but her gentle radiance appeared as if floating by, effortlessly and so *unself-consciously*. Even the knees of the offensive linemen on the Barnwell Warhorse football team weakened when she passed by.

St. James writes that “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.”

For those who doubt this ancient testimony of St. James, simply turn on your T.V. Read the newspaper. And *then* commit yourself to spend even *half* as much time reading, learning, and practicing the ‘Wisdom from above.’ Did I mention that it is free?! Did I mention that *you*—and nobody else—is fully in control of this gift of inner beauty?

The *reason* we do not spend time paying attention to the ‘Wisdom from above’ is because it is so easy to ignore our whispering God in the midst of our screaming world. This is why you must pray—with your lips *and in your lives*—just as we did in our opening prayer this morning: “Grant us, O Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly...Grant us, O Lord, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those things that will endure.” (Things like peace, mercy, faith, hope, and love.)

The tall, beautiful, and fragrant tea olive I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon was more than a metaphor for Elizabeth’s beauty. It was a real hedge. Her parents had cultivated this naturally beautiful and fragrant barrier for privacy along the perimeter of their back yard. It was Elizabeth’s very unpleasant chore to trim the thousands of prickly leaves on that colossal, 9-foot tall hedgerow.

When you are an adolescent having to use manual shears on jagged branches and prickly leaves in the hot sun, you don't really care about the sweet scent of the blooms. You just want to finish the chore and go have fun with your friends—friends like the football players who drove by just then with all the windows rolled down.

“Hey Elizabeth, What are you doing?” they shouted into the back yard. “Trimming this stupid hedge,” she shouted back. Stepping down off the ladder and throwing the shears into the dirt, she walked over to where they stopped the car beside her yard. “See this!” she said, showing all the scratches and on her arms and legs. “I hate this chore more than anything!”

St. James admonishes his congregation that when they covet something they cannot obtain, they end up engaged in disputes and conflicts. This is a constant temptation for us—individually, as a congregation, and in all the other communities to which we belong. Dispute and conflict are normal aspects of wrangling for advantage. If the original disciples of Jesus were guilty of arguing about who was the greatest, then we ought to *know* we also are going to have problems with this.

Those football players certainly did. As they drove off from Elizabeth's yard to their afternoon practice they argued the whole time about who among *them* would succeed in asking her out and winning her affection. God bless Bobby, the 1st string offensive lineman. He was not just all talk. What he lacked in wisdom, he made up for in determination.

At 7:00 the next morning before heading to school he snuck his daddy's chain saw into the trunk of the car and drove straight to Elizabeth's house. He cranked up that saw, got down on his knees, and began cutting through the broad, densely branched forms of those mature tea olives. He was determined that Elizabeth's fair skin would from then on remain unblemished by the scrapes and scratches from all those prickly leaves. Bobby was executing his plan to win Elizabeth's heart while executing the perfectly-manicured, evergreen hedge in her backyard.

At that very same moment Elizabeth's father emerged from his morning shower. The loud, familiar sound of her hair dryer in the room next door sounded strangely deeper in tone, more intermittent, and distant—like the sound of a chain saw. He threw on his bathrobe to go see what the racket was all about. Elizabeth did too!

Father and daughter emerged through the back doorway onto the patio. Looking across a dark green 'blanket' of finely toothed foliage, they saw Bobby standing in the middle of the debacle. If you think Bobby's plan made an impression on Elizabeth, consider—for a moment—the impression it made on her father.

St. James exhorted his listeners, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly!” This is so true, dear people. When we grasp out of selfish ambition, we are asking wrongly. On the other hand, when we seek the ‘wisdom from above’ we are responding with daily, humble discipline to our whispering God who relentlessly calls out to our screaming world.

Do yourself a favor. Take time to work diligently on your *inner* beauty—the thing over which you have total and free control. You're worth it! Seek what is pure, peaceable, and gentle. Practice your willingness to yield, your sense of mercy for those less fortunate. Let go of your partiality and hypocrisy. As St. James promised, “(You) draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.”

It is easy to see Bobby's selfish ambition. It is more challenging to consider our own. It is easy to laugh at other peoples' foolishness. It is harder to laugh at our own.

We would like to think we are more sophisticated than the first disciples of Jesus, but we are not. Like them, we fail to grasp just how radical he is when it comes to peace and justice, gentleness and mercy. Like them, we are afraid to ask Jesus about these things. We are just as afraid of his answer—those of us who want to be first must consider ourselves last of all and servant of all.

The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus has told us *and shown us* plainly what we must do in order to follow him. He has revealed how not to be anxious about earthly things. He has revealed how to love things heavenly. We have a blueprint with Jesus of how to hold fast to what endures in the midst of things that are passing away.

God has gifted every one of us with a dazzling inner beauty, and we are in full control of this beauty because its source is everlasting. God *is* the source of love, everlasting...like a whisper of heavenly Wisdom calling out to a screaming world. And the promise of this gentle, peaceable, merciful whisper is simple and true: “Draw near to me, and I will draw near to you.”

Amen.