

September 20, 2009
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Waging Wisdom

While the world wages war, Christians are called to wage wisdom.

Quickly, without really thinking about it, call up a mental image of someone who embodies the word "smart." Got it? Now, just as spontaneously, get a mental picture of someone who fleshes out the word "wisdom." Hold it.

Now I'm willing to bet your mind's eye didn't bring up two identical images to fit with those two different words.

When we tried this little exercise, the "smart" person wore large glasses and was attired in an expensive but conservatively styled business suit.

This "smart" person had all the most traditional earmarks of power -- white, male, forties, tall, slender.

Because he was "smart," this guy also exuded an aura of "successful" -- he had money, a good job, a nice car, and sharp clothes. The "smart"-image man looked both impressive and intimidating.

(An alternative image may also appear. That of a classic "geek" -- scrawny, glasses, pocket-protector, the whole works.

However, that image itself has been transformed by the age of the microprocessor. Bill Gates, the most "geeky" guy imaginable, is also one of the richest persons in the world.)

But the word "wisdom" brought up entirely different features to our minds. The smart and savvy guy disappeared. In its place was a face creased and worn, lined with a road map of wrinkles.

The hair was grey, longish, and had that "Einstein" look. Our "wise" person's looks and dress suggested perhaps a foreign ethnicity, but perhaps not.

Gender, too, wasn't exactly clear --there were hints of both feminine and masculine traits.

There was, however, a decidedly ruffled and even weary quality to this "wise" one, who also clearly would have qualified for the "senior citizen" rate at the movies.

Instead of the telltale marks of "success," there was a suggestion of satisfaction. A sense of peace and contentment seemed to hang about this human image of "wisdom."

Your own images, of course, may be quite different. But for all of us, being "smart" and being "wise" inhabit two different places in our culturally determined cognitive mappings.

Which image, the "smart" one or the "wise" one, is more appealing?

From our vision, the choice is between being rich, successful and well-groomed or being old, wrinkled and having a perpetually bad-hair day.

What a choice!

Our mental images are predetermined by cultural biases and prejudices hard-wired into our brains. Being "smart" is a quality highly valued in our society.

That's why the images we dream up are of those most highly valued, our versions of the "ruling elite" -- the rich and powerful.

Being "wise" is a quality that doesn't easily fit into our consumer-oriented, "Veni, Vidi, VISA"

("I came, I saw, I charged") culture.

It's not easy to see what "wisdom" can do for us.

So we identify wisdom with other images that we give only marginal status to in our culture -- the very old and the very young, the mythical "noble" poor, the eternally powerless.

At best, we credit "wisdom" with being a virtue we may possibly have the luxury of developing in our retirement years.

It is false flattery for our culture to claim that wisdom is achieved in old age, or that we respect and honor our elders for the wisdom they possess.

The truth is, we give the title of "being wise" to the "aged" because we are too busy trying to be "smart" to be bothered with such an intangible quality as "wisdom."

Wisdom is not a peripheral quality of life and faith.

In ancient Israel, wisdom was a normative, integral part of a compassionate person's mind and spirit.

Strangely, Jewish wisdom books are often dismissed by us in our search for more ethereal, spiritual insights.

The Book of Proverbs, for example, seems far too concerned with the mundane to appeal to our lofty spiritual aims. Jewish wisdom, after all, stressed realism.

It asked point- blank, as does James in today's epistle text, "How can we live so as not to displease God but continue in God's favor?"

The advice of Jewish wisdom was not any mumbo-jumbo of cryptic sayings, or some secret knowledge.

It was suggestions on how to run an effective household, how to work with others, how to get along in this world.

Jewish wisdom on occasion taught that even wisdom itself needs to be tempered by wisdom.

"Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? ... For the one who loves God shall succeed with both"

(Ecclesiastes 7:16, 18).

This vision of wisdom shaped Jesus' advice to his disciples that they should be "as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves."

Wisdom is not the sage, sanctimonious sayings of old folks. It is the informed, inspired, yet humble movement of God's Spirit and insight within the human heart and mind.

When James urges Christians to act wisely in their community of faith, he is differentiating between those who know more and those who know better.

Owls are our classic symbols of wisdom.

Perhaps it is their quiet ways, their wide-eyed, taking-it-all-in stare.

Or maybe it is the fact that they can swivel their necks 180 degrees and so keep as sharp a lookout behind them as they can in front of them, which gives them this reputation for "wisdom."

Crows and ravens, on the other hand, are known to be very smart birds. Like parrots, they can be taught to talk and can figure out fairly complex logistical problems.

However, crows and ravens are also compulsive collectors.

They will fill their nests with odd bits of shiny metal, gleaming buttons, bright string --anything glitzy and gaudy that catches their eye is dragged home.

In today's text, James calls Christians to embody wisdom, that is, to be the owls of this world -- a world where there is the paradox of more and more information, and less and less wisdom.

Too many of us have become crows -- smart in the ways of the world, but stupidly suckered in to any bright new idea, any slickly appealing gimmick.

The acquisitive way of crows leads to loud squabbles and long battles over particularly prized bits of flotsam and jetsam.

For all their smarts, crows will spend the better part of a day pursuing another member of the flock who has picked up an especially appealing piece of junk.

You can listen to them scream and screech as they wage war against the crow with the coveted goody.

Christian owls, James reminds us, are called not to wage war, but to wage wisdom on this world. Waging wisdom takes an entirely different type of armature than the secular world is used to wearing.

James calls his Christian brothers and sisters to outfit themselves with purity, peace, gentleness, reasonableness (a yielding spirit), mercy, good fruits and sincerity (v.17).

Jim Wallis, the founder of the Sojourners Christian Community in Washington, D.C., gives one of the best examples of what it means to wage wisdom that I have ever encountered.

Wallis tells of being mugged right outside his home by four kids. They rushed him, slashed his face, and then yelled "Keep him down! Get his wallet!"

Wallis popped up quickly, which seemed to surprise them. Seeing no weapons flashed, he squared to face his attackers. This was the first chance he had to really see each mugger face to face.

Surprised he saw that his assailants were just children -- three about 15, and one little one who couldn't have been more than 13....

The boys backed up a little when they saw Jim Wallis was bigger than they had expected.

Jim Wallis is a strong believer in nonviolence, but has learned that being a weight lifter often helps in these potential conflict situations! The one who had hit him moved into a boxing stance while the others circled.

The little guy began attempting some ineffectual karate kicks, which Wallis assumed he had seen on television.

He decided to confront them, not intending to hurt them, but only to fend them off. Instinctively, he began to scold these lost young souls.

Wallis told them just to stop it, to stop terrorizing people, to stop such violent behavior in their neighborhood.

Finally, he shouted at them, "I'm a pastor!" And he told them if they wanted to try to beat up and rob a pastor, they should come ahead and take their best shot. ...

Wallis knew that invoking the authority of the church in the street is hardly a sure thing these days, when our churches often have such little involvement there.

Whatever it was that changed their minds, the youthful muggers turned and ran.

"Get back here," Jim Wallis shouted after them -- then instantly realized it probably wasn't a good thing to say at that moment. But then something unusual happened.

The littlest kid, who couldn't have been more than 4 1/2 feet tall, turned back and looked at Rev. Wallis as he ran away. With a sad face and voice the young karate kicker said, "Pastor, ask God for a blessing for me."

He and his friends had just assaulted a minister. The little one had tried so hard to be one of the big tough guys. Yet he knew he needed a blessing. The young boy knew he was in trouble. They all did

(Jim Wallis, *Who Speaks for God?* [New York: Delacorte Press,], 67-69).

When Christians wage wisdom on this world, even tough guys become touch guys who respond to the touch of God, that touch of grace.

Amen.

