

Gates Presbyterian Church *So You Want First Place?* September 19, 2021

This morning, as we celebrate the kick-off of our new program year, we have a small gift for you – a kaleidoscope. I remember having one as a child and spending endless hours looking through it and slowly turning it around to see the countless patterns it could create, each one unique and beautiful and brightly colored.

Dictionary.com defines a kaleidoscope this way: an optical instrument in which bits of glass, held loosely at the end of a rotating tube, are shown in continually changing symmetrical forms by reflection in two or more mirrors set at angles to each other.

You can change what you see through a kaleidoscope by shaking or turning it. It works because the two mirrors involved reflect the image from one side to the other. For me, it is a particularly appropriate metaphor for where we find ourselves today in God's creation. Each of us, I think, is a wonderfully unique, colorful, reflection of a tiny bit of our Creator. Made in God's image, we nevertheless bear also the wounds of our world and so sometimes our outlines are a bit jagged, broken by the tragedies of life, or they are rounded where the daily stresses have worn us down. But no matter what shape or size or color we are, we still reflect God when seen through the lens of faith. Together, we make up Christ's body in the world.

No matter what upheavals shake or turn our worlds, be they sudden violent movements or slow unnoticed changes, we continue to reflect God's good work. Sometimes, in the midst of a shaking up, we lose our way, moving out of communion with God and instead of a clear image, we see only the blur of movement and chaos. But when we settle back into communion with the One who made us, a new picture emerges – just as beautiful as those of the past, but different now – arranged in new ways, showing new patterns, pointing towards as yet unseen but God-infused images.

For me, in this moment, it feels like the kaleidoscope of our life together has been severely shaken. The pandemic has upended life as we know it. We continue to bear the scars of past traumas, like the 9/11 tragedy, which have wounded our world deeply and continue to ripple out, affecting us in unexpected and harmful ways. In our public life, we continue to wrestle with deep conflicts and increasingly polarized conversations about everything from healthcare to elections, and racial justice to climate change.

The upheavals of life have obscured, for many of us, the image of God reflected in each person we encounter and in the communities we inhabit. A new image has yet to settle out and we fail to recognize the body of Christ in the world. Our attention is drawn too often to the brokenness all around us and we cannot yet see the beautiful new vision that will come when we return to God's embrace and settle into a deeper communion with the Holy One.

Just like the two mirrors in the kaleidoscope, we mirror God and are ourselves reflected back to God through the power of the Holy Spirit, the saving work of Jesus, and the sustaining love of our Creator. Even as the kaleidoscope turns, we must remain steadfast in our belief that God's reflection still lives in each of our lives, just waiting to reveal a larger picture when we are able to come together in harmony, each of us retaining our unique characteristics and all of us, together, reflecting a much larger part of God's presence and glory and love than could ever be possible for each of us alone.

Unfortunately, living through this kind of disruption is far from easy. When everything feels out of whack, it is increasingly difficult to cling to a belief in a future reality of beauty and clarity and wholeness. With the world demanding that we take up its wisdom about life in order to survive, we must work doubly hard to resist the call to cling to material, worldly things and instead focus on the wisdom Jesus calls us to live by, the only wisdom that will allow us to truly thrive.

How easy it is, even if we spend a lot of time with Jesus, to be pulled off the road by the temptations of our world – temptations for power and status, influence and wealth. None of us is exempt from the lure of following other gods instead of walking the difficult and unheralded path of Jesus. It is not an easy journey at all.

As James put it in our reading today, “it is the way you *live*, not the way you *talk*, that matters most.” The world invites us to be “wise” in many ways that do not follow God's wisdom. Our job is to resist these invitations and focus instead on living in ways that point to God's healing presence in the world.

Easier said than done, you say? I totally agree, for we encounter so many false ideas masquerading as wisdom in the world. For instance...

“Mean spirited ambition,” says James, “isn't wisdom.”

“Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn’t wisdom.”

“In fact, whenever you are trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others’ throats.”

In other words, following the world’s wisdom leads to nothing but pain for all of us. And yet, how often do we witness such choices disrupting our communities. Perhaps we believe that we must engage in “mean spirited ambition” to get ahead. We justify our decisions because we need to support our families, or realize our own potential or make sure people understand what is “really” going on.

We have all seen this kind of behavior, colleagues throwing one another under the bus in order to win a promotion; athletes disrupting a competitor’s training or peace of mind to give themselves an advantage; gossips spreading rumors about someone in order to undermine the person’s status in the community while also raising their own.

In the end, mean spirited ambition just corrupts the person who engages in it. The worker finds himself unable to complete a project when his target refuses to work for him following his promotion. The athlete is disqualified from competition and loses the chance to even try to for the title they hoped to gain. The mean girl finds she is not trusted by anyone and has no real friendships to support her in a time of stress.

Twisting the truth to make ourselves sound wise, [also] isn’t wisdom,” James continues. How often this goes hand in hand with mean spirited ambition! Perhaps we are afraid that the unvarnished truth in a given situation isn’t enough to make our point – so we leave something out, or we embellish just a bit on the side, or we take something out of context. I suppose we have all experienced, or observed, the increasingly complex web of confusion and lies that often grows out of a first mis-telling of the truth – trust is broken, integrity is lost, relationships suffer. Perhaps we get what we hoped for in the beginning but the truth has a way of making itself known and eventually our success may feel empty or be lost when the real story surfaces.

Indeed, the world’s wisdom may benefit us for a time, but in the end, it is a selfish wisdom, a wisdom that shows no loyalty and will just as easily turn against us in the hands of our neighbor. For the world’s wisdom, you see, is all about greed and hunger for power, about wanting something that is not

ours or acting with only our own best interests in mind. This kind of wisdom cannot be sustained. It is not real wisdom.

No, “real wisdom, God’s wisdom,” says James “begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessing, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced.”

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that James describes the holy life as the life that gets along with others. It is not holy because it includes a lot of worship services, it is not holy because it can recite all the creeds and quote the Bible by heart, it is not holy because it gives to the poor. It is holy because it gets along with others. And what does that mean? It means to be gentle and reasonable. To be overflowing with mercy and blessing. It means not to be hot one day and cold the next. Not to be two-faced.

How many of us can say that these characteristic always describe us? To get along with others does not just mean to agree with everything and not make waves. It doesn’t mean to allow someone to mistreat you just to keep the peace. To get along with others means, I think, to see clearly what they need and then to help meet those needs; to see clearly what gifts they have and then to encourage them to use them and appreciate their use yourself; to hear their experience in the world and to respect the wisdom they have gained from it; to invest in relationships that are honest and affirming, willing to speak unwelcome truths when necessary in a manner filled with love. To be gentle and reasonable is to hear one another out. To offer the benefit of the doubt when someone is unkind or grumpy or annoyed, to listen carefully when someone shares their pain, to speak thoughtfully when we disagree.

Our world right now does not do too well getting along with others. We are quick to judge, quick to dismiss, quick to demonize. We are slow to seek understanding, slow to hear new perspectives, slow to admit when we are wrong and be gracious when we are right. We are far too focused on retaining our own power through mean spirited ambition and twisting the truth.

How do we change the nature of our community and how we relate to one another?

James offers a clear answer.

“You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy the results, *only* if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.” (James 3: 18)

That is the key right there – treating each other with dignity and honor. And how do we do that?

We remember, every time we enter a difficult conversation or encounter a person we don’t agree with, that God made each of us in God’s image, that our imperfect, unfinished, broken selves reflect a small part of our Creator, and that we must therefore honor and respect and love this imperfect image of the Most High in the one with whom we speak.

What a very hard thing to do.

The disciples, you will have noticed, don’t know how to do it either. In our gospel reading, Jesus has just been telling the disciples what the end of his life will look like. They don’t know what he is talking about and are afraid to ask. So, as they walk along the road to Capernaum, instead of spending the time learning from Jesus about how to follow him in the face of all that is to come, they argue amongst themselves as to who will be first.

I wonder how often *we* miss the chance to learn from Jesus, distracted by the world’s wisdom and missing the chance to embrace God’s;

I wonder how often *we* don’t know what Jesus is talking about and are afraid to ask;

I wonder how often *we* give up before we start because we are afraid we cannot live out the answer Jesus will give us.

PAUSE

My friends, following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. I imagine many of us can sympathize with the disciples who would rather discuss who will occupy the most favored seat than hear more about the sacrifices that they may be called upon to make as followers of Jesus.

What worldly concerns do we spend our time and energy on when we are supposed to be walking with Jesus?

Where do we divert our attention when we should be focusing on the pain that is all around us and wondering how we can partner with the people who are experiencing it?

So often, we spend our energy on the world's wisdom in an attempt to make ourselves feel important or complete, when we should instead be surrendering our lives to the only one who can truly make us whole.

The thing is that Jesus sees right through our meager defenses and our attempts to avoid the difficult challenges of being faithful. He gets right to the point. "So you want first place?" he asks, "Then take last place. Be the servant of all." The irony of it all, of course, is that last place at God's banquet table feels immeasurably more fulfilling than first place in the world's most powerful gathering.

How do we do that – take last place and be servant of all? Jesus answers with God's wisdom, the simple task of getting along with others, played out in a concrete way on the margins of society. He tells the disciples, "whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me and, far more than me, God who sent me." In other words, whoever embraces those that society marginalizes and ignores. The ones our communities deem invisible and unworthy of respect or a voice. Whoever embraces them takes the last place and, in doing so, also embraces the One who made us.

And how much more whole could we possibly feel than to sink into God's embrace?

"So let God work his will in you," says James. "Yell a loud *no* to the devil and watch him make himself scarce. Say a quiet *yes* to God and he'll be there in no time... Get serious. Really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet."

And that's it of course. In the middle of this chaotic time when so many of us feel hopeless, so many of us turn to the world's wisdom to find security and comfort and strength, so many of us feel certain that God has abandoned us, God invites us to get on our knees before God, to let God work God's will in us, to be made whole and holy.

As the kaleidoscope of our lives continues to turn, as the broken and brightly colored pieces that represent our lives cascade into new positions, our job is to rest in God's power and comfort, and to trust that the Holy Spirit will hold us firmly until the pieces find rest again.

In this unsettling time, God is offering us a chance to imagine something completely new. Out of the uncertainty and discomfort of our current pain and disorientation, we must trust that following God's wisdom will set us on

the path to wholeness. Following God's wisdom will offer us a real and sustaining truth. Following God's wisdom will build up our community, strengthen our relationships, unleash our creativity and restore our hope.

As the broken pieces of our pre-pandemic patterns of community settle in a new design, let's trust God's leading and dare to try new things, to reach beyond our comfort zones and to risk saying yes to God.