

Not Common Sense, but God Sense

November 3, 2002

Background Study

In the last two weeks, we saw how thinking of ourselves as trustees of God's creation is more useful than trying to figure out what it means to be a steward. We also looked at the importance of being grateful receivers of all God's gifts. This week, we'll consider what it means to be wise trustees of God's house.

A Key Scripture Passage – James 1:5; 3:13-18 (NRSV)

⁵If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. . . . ¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But 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. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Our Mission as God's Trustees

Trustees are given the responsibility for managing assets in a way that is faithful to the person(s) who entrusted the assets to the trustee. Trustees often manage endowment funds or charitable trusts and always have a set of guidelines or philosophies that guide them in their work. Similarly, we have been entrusted by God to manage well his creation and the obvious question is, "what are we to do with it?!" How do we go about making good decisions that are consistent with God's wishes for his creation? Has God given us a mission statement or a set of guidelines? Well . . . he has!

The mission of the United Methodist Church is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the good news of God's grace and thus seeking the fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world."¹ This mission statement is derived from Jesus' great commission to his disciples (Matthew 28:19-20) and from the biblical understanding that God's people are to be the agents through whom God accomplishes the renewal of all creation. We are to be the light to the world (Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16). At St. Andrew, our vision as trustees is that we are "to invite people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving." These statements embody our goals as trustees of all that God has entrusted to us. Then, the next question is how God wants us to go about accomplishing our mission. Here, we have to "unlearn" a few things.

Wisdom

We often think of wisdom as understanding the ways of the world or the accumulated knowledge of how life actually works. A wise person is someone who has learned the hard lessons of life and can use that learning well. But this is not the Biblical understanding of what it means to be wise. For the people of God, wisdom begins with God. "The fear² of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is

¹ From the UMC *Book of Discipline* 2000.

² The meaning of "fear" here is a little archaic. It refers to the reverence and respect we have for God, who is holy and awesome.

insight” (Proverbs 9:10). Wisdom is walking in God’s ways. We are wise when we understand God’s moral will for our lives and walk in his light. It isn’t about understanding the ways of the world, but about understanding the ways of God.

Several books of the Old Testament ~ Job, some of the Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes ~ are what we call “wisdom literature” Often, they provide an important corrective to conclusions we might draw about God, life, and ourselves if we had only the stories from the Bible. There are a few keys to grasping the meaning of biblical wisdom:³

- Wisdom literature reflects on the “lived experience of everyday life.” Job, Proverbs, and many of the Psalms don’t speak to great events and grand transformations, they speak to the daily grind and struggles that face every person.
- The wisdom literature insists that all the ordinariness of everyday life is filled with ethical and moral significance. Everyday we must decide whether we walk in the shadow of God’s wisdom or our own. Wisdom in the Bible is always about living within God’s moral will for his people.
- The wisdom teachers are not just passing on common sense, rather, they reflect on the reality of God’s creation, how it works and what it means for us all as we try to make our way through life and to God. The book of Proverbs is “common sense permeated by God’s will.” It is “God sense.”

The Book of James⁴ in the New Testament is very much like the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. In this week’s key passage, James contrasts the wisdom “from above” with wisdom that is “earthly.” Notice that James doesn’t refer to wisdom as being smart, or intellectual, or efficient, or effective, or any other words we’d usually associate with being a wise trustee. Instead, the wise are “peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” It is out of such “good fruits”⁵ that we are to be wise trustees.

Wise Builders

Paul knew that he was to be a wise trustee – a wise builder of God’s house. To the churches in Corinth, Greece, he wrote “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). In the Greek, when Paul refers to himself as a *skilled* builder, he uses the Greek word, *sophia*, the word for wisdom. You see, when Paul or we, build God’s house, we are to build wisely, with Jesus Christ as our foundation and cornerstone. Indeed, Jesus is the personification of God’s Wisdom, from whom we are to learn God’s way (Matthew 11:28-30). In our decision-making as trustees we are called to keep our eyes on Jesus, working without partiality or hypocrisy, being willing to yield to others, always understanding that our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We do what builds up our Christian community and avoid what tears it down. We do what is a good witness to those who are outside our community and avoid what is not.

³ Bruce Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999)

⁴ James was the half-brother of Jesus. He was not a follower of Jesus during his ministry, but became a Christian in the years after Jesus’ resurrection. James succeeded Peter as the leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem.

⁵ In his letter to the churches in Galatia (in modern-day Turkey), Paul tells them that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23a).

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Job 28:12-29 What is wisdom? Where do we find it?</p>	<p>Day 2 Proverbs 3 Instruction in wisdom</p>
<p>Day 3 Proverbs 4:10-27 Wisdom is a gift from God but we must be disciplined in our effort to obtain it.</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 11:16-19, 28-30 Jesus as wisdom. The yoke to be put on is Jesus/Wisdom.</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Timothy 3:10-17 The Bible equips us to do "good work," to be wise trustees.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

