

GOOD FRUITS

JAMES 3:13-4:3, 7-8A

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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I thought it would be good, as we ease our way into fall, for us to get our bearings.

As I've said before, I came to the Christian calendar a bit later in life. This idea of ordering time according to the life and ministry of Jesus was not part of my church experience growing up. And it's something that I've come to appreciate very much.

So, the season of the Christian calendar that we are currently in is called "Ordinary Time."

It is the least glamorous time of the Christian year.

Advent prepares us for the coming of the Christ child, Christmas celebrates his arrival, Epiphany honours Jesus' revelation to the Gentiles, Lent sets our feet with Jesus as he makes his way to the cross.

Then, of course, the awful events of Holy Week where we are present with Jesus as he lays down his life for his friends and his enemies.

And then the glorious hope of resurrection that comes with Easter, the hinge for the entire Christian faith.

This is followed by Pentecost—the birth of the church, the descent of the Holy Spirit.

And then? Ordinary time.

I love this phrase, “ordinary time.”

Ordinary time is where we live most of our days. We have extraordinary times throughout our lives—times when we are faced with some unique opportunity, times when we are plunged into an utterly unanticipated crisis, times when we get to experience things that are utterly out-of-the-ordinary.

But most of our days are, well, *ordinary*.

Most of our days are spent doing things like going to work or school, doing the laundry, washing the dishes, running the kids to volleyball or piano lessons, cleaning out the garage, tending the garden, caring for children or elderly parents, going for coffee at Tim Hortons... ☺

Ordinary time is where we live. And ordinary time is the time in which our faith is lived out.

There are mountaintop experiences in our lives—times when God seems uniquely present, times when our souls are stirred with wonder, times when the way of Jesus seems beautiful and rich and compelling.

But *most* of the time, our convictions about God and neighbour and the nature of faith are forged and maintained in the ordinary circumstances of every day life.

Ordinary time is the time where we are called to bear fruit, where the way of Jesus can grow in our lives.

Ordinary time is the time when we seek to answer and to implement the most basic of human questions: ***How ought I to live? What does a good life look like?***

Our passage today probably sounded a bit familiar to you. I used part of it in a sermon a few weeks ago. But it is one of those passages that I think we could do with hearing over and over and over again. I know that I can. ☺

James 13 begins with these words:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

James sets before us two kinds of wisdom.

The first is “worldly” wisdom. James says that it involves things like the harbouring of “bitter envy and selfish ambition in our hearts.” He describes this kind of “wisdom” as “earthly,” “unspiritual,” and “demonic” (James 3:15).

Most of us would probably think, “Well, that doesn’t sound very wise at all.” How can James possibly describe that as “wisdom?”

And yet, who among us would look around at our world and say that it is not driven by envy and selfish ambition?

What is envy but wanting something someone else has? What is selfish ambition but a desire to climb over others and exalt the self?

This is the world we live in. We are conditioned by media and advertising to always be wanting more, to compare ourselves to the rich and the beautiful, to buy into the restless acquisitiveness that drives the consumerism that our economy demands. We are conditioned by the world around us and by our own natural instincts to demand recognition, to hunger for attention, to get to the top, to rise above our competitors.

And we see the “fruit” of this kind of wisdom all around us.

We see a culture gorging itself on consumer goods and entertainment, a culture where we are always speaking over top of one another (election debates, anyone?!), a culture where popular discourse is very often crude and demeaning, and where everyone is scrambling to get ahead of everyone else.

This is the world we live in.

But... (I am so thankful for the “but’s” of Scripture ☺)

But, James says, there is another kind of wisdom. The kind of wisdom that comes from heaven. The kind of wisdom that leads to lives well lived. The kind of wisdom that spreads goodness and peace and hope to all around. The kind of wisdom that *will* lead to good fruit.

But 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. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Can you imagine what the church would look like, if those of us who name Jesus as Lord consistently lived out this wisdom?

Can you imagine what the *world* would look like if the church exhibited this wisdom to all around us?

It would be *extraordinary*.

And speaking of “extraordinary,” sometimes extraordinary examples are just the things we need as we attempt to become these kinds of people in our more ordinary days.

This week, I received an example of what this wisdom looks like in practice in an incredibly complex and difficult context.

On Wednesday, I got an invitation to attend an online press conference hosted by MCC USA where they would be hearing from MCC partners and workers on the ground in Lebanon.

These are the people working in the refugee camps that are currently flooded with refugees primarily from Syria, but also from other troubled parts of the world. These are the people providing food, medicine, shelter, education, and hope to people in truly desperate situation.

Obviously, I was interested due to our church's present efforts at bringing two families from Syria to Lethbridge. I was also interested because some of the speakers would be talking directly about the region that our families have fled.

So, I went online and I listened in.

We heard heartbreaking stories. Stories of women and children with nothing but the clothes on their back sleeping in abandoned slaughterhouses with no doors or windows because there was nowhere else to go, of children crying on the floor, begging them for food, of women and men talking about the horrors of war that they had seen.

But we also heard inspiring stories.

I want to read you an excerpt from the transcript of this press conference.

These are the words of Dr. Riad Jarjour, Forum for Development Culture and Dialogue (FDGD):

Now when the Syrian crisis started in 2010 or 2011... we had a big influx of internally displaced people who were forced to leave the city of Homs,

where there was heavy fighting and more than 60,000 people had to leave the suburbs ... These people ... [came] to the Qalamoun area...

They came and they were welcomed and were given gifts from the people who welcomed them. They gave them sugar, they gave them rooms to stay in, houses that were empty, farms and whatever. We were looking for support. We were crying for support, we said, "Oh God, where can we get help from." Then MCC came and said, 'Let's see if we can help you.' This was the beginning of MCC help that started with 2,000 and we ended up helping 6,000 families. (Now) we are helping more than 65,000 people in that area who have come from all over Syria... The 65,000 people include MCC help and that of other organizations. Of course, these people came with only their clothes on.

They had nothing whatsoever. Before the war, they leave and they take their precious things with them. But so many of them, the war just happened and they all thought, 'we go today and come back tomorrow. Still they are not able to go back. And so they are stuck in a difficult situation and they came to this area.

Today we are feeding 6,000... families who would have starved if there was no parcel to give them to eat, because MCC, through the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, is the only organization that assisted in that area where we are...

The people we have there are Muslims, maybe, but we have also Christians. The percentage of the Christians in the area where we are (providing support) is something like 20 percent. What we have been doing there as a Christian organization -- We never said we are Christians, but, we do, of course, people know that we are Christians -- what this has done is draw the people together in a miraculous way. We have more than three villages with more than 25- to 30,000 Christians in them. MCC/ Canadian Foodgrains Bank has drawn the people of that area together in such a way that interfaith relations were strengthened.

The Muslims said, 'Oh, for heaven's sake, these are people who come from Canada, from America, who are Christians and we are being treated equally like the other Christians. We are all looked upon as people of God and that's why I think they changed because their dignity is preserved and they are treated equally.

I wish I could read you the whole transcript. It was an inspiring hour.

But perhaps you are wondering, what does any of this have to do with our passage from James? What does it have to do with the two kinds of wisdom he talks about?

What struck me over and over again, as I listened to these stories, was the unobtrusive and behind-the-scenes nature of the work that these people are doing in horrendous situations.

The work that these people are doing does not scream out, "look at me, look at us!" It does not demand recognition. It is not animated by a desire to climb above others.

It is driven by mercy, sincerity, and a deep conviction that the seeds of peace, and goodness that are sown are never wasted.

It is gentle work and shows no partiality (it's not like the Christians get help but the Muslims don't!). And it is transforming a desperate situation.

It was remarkable to hear from people on the ground that MCC and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank are among the only organizations that have been in difficult places like this, and that they are there long before the microphones and cameras arrived and will be there long after they leave.

These stories made me so proud to be connected, even in a very small way, to organizations like MCC and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

When I hear stories like this, and when I hold them up alongside passages like James 3, I think, *this* is what “the wisdom that comes from above” looks like in a hurting and broken world that is plagued by division and conflict.

Now, most of us will never be in these kinds of situations and will never do the specific kind of work that these MCC partners in Lebanon are doing right now.

And, if you’re anything like me, you hear stories like that and instinctively think, “Oh, man, that sounds so wonderful... But my life is nothing like that. I will never do anything that important or make that much of a difference in anyone’s life.”

But the “wisdom that comes from above” is not only needed in war zones and refugee camps. It is also needed in families and workplaces, in churches and community organizations, in schools and on sports fields, in political debate and religious dialogue.

The wisdom that comes from above is for extraordinary times, certainly, but it is no less necessary in ordinary times as well.

Because there is so much ugliness in our world. There is so much inhumanity, so much violence and dysfunction, so much harshness and contempt, so much selfishness and greed, so much pain and confusion, so much hurt and misspent longing.

There is so much in this world that is not right, so much that wounds and destroys and tears people apart.

And in this world, how desperately we need human beings who are pure, peaceable, and gentle, who are full of mercy and good fruits.

How desperately we need peacemakers—those who keep on sowing the seeds of peace, even when it seems like we’re tossing seeds into the wind, even when it feels like our efforts go completely unnoticed, even if we are mocked or ridiculed for our efforts.

How desperately we need those who heed the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

Everything terrible is something that needs our love.

And who do this because they believe that there is a harvest of righteousness to come. A harvest of justice, truth, and the right-relatedness of all people to God, to one another, and to creation.

So, as we go out into a new week—a week that may contain extraordinary things, or may be utterly ordinary—may God help us to be people whose words and actions, whose lives and character are animated by the wisdom that comes from above.

May God help us, as those who name Jesus as our Teacher and our Lord, to be:

- pure (undivided, focused)
- peaceable
- gentle
- willing to yield
- without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy

May God help our lives to be full of mercy and good fruits.

Amen.

