

“Submissive Spirits”
September 22, 2024
Scripture: James 3:13—4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

I’ve been watching the news recently and, apparently, there’s an election going on...? Anyone else pick up on that? It is relentless. Seeing all those campaign ads and hearing all the speeches it strikes me how enormous a person’s ego has to be to run for any political office. I don’t mean that judgmentally; it’s just a fact that anyone who puts themselves out there as the one to be evaluated and chosen must have a very large ego. More power to ‘em, I guess. But in my reading of this passage from James, possessing an ego like that can come with some pitfalls.

The writer is concerned with what motivates a person in a position of leadership. Are they informed with wisdom from above or wisdom from below? Wisdom from below is characterized by “bitter envy and selfish ambition.” There’s a desire to have what others appear to enjoy, to have prestige and power. I suppose to some extent most people want that and most politicians certainly do. But are they entirely motivated by it? Is all they’re after really just status-driven?

Wisdom from above, on the other hand, is “peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy.” How are those traits revealed in a person’s actions? What do we look for in their behavior to tell us if they fit that model or not? Most of us don’t know the people running for office personally. All we have to go by are their actions in the world. How do they respond to criticism; who do they surround themselves with for advice; when shown a problem where do they turn to solve it?

These are the kinds of questions the writer of James advises we ask ourselves when evaluating our own behavior and the behavior of those whom we might elect to lead us. And some of you may think that there’s no connection between our faith and politics. That the two exist on entirely different planes, but if our faith doesn’t at least inform our political choices, then I’m not sure what relevance it should have in our lives. Is faith just sentimentalism that we haul out whenever we feel sad or frightened? Or should our faith be what undergirds our actions in the world? If we can’t look to the wisdom of our faith to help us make life-altering decisions for ourselves and others around us, then it seems sort of hollow and pointless.

Listening to political pundits as they talk about the candidates, one thing that comes up over and over is the observation that voters really mostly want to know how the candidates’ policies will make their life better. And I’m sure that’s true; that’s probably on the mind of most people when they’re deciding who to vote for. But for people of faith, at least those of us who follow the teachings of Jesus, self-benefit isn’t enough. A question I think our faith teaches us to ask is how will a candidate’s policies make life better for the most vulnerable around us. Submitting ourselves to God’s activity in our lives directs our attention away from our own needs and toward the needs of others.

We demonstrate that in our efforts in the world through outreach and in the ways we spend our money as a church, but that can’t be the limit of our concern. The truth is *we* cannot solve the problems of poverty in our community or in the country. *We* cannot ensure that

undocumented immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers are treated with dignity and justice through our efforts alone. We don't have those kinds of resources. But government does. As Dr. William Barber II, the co-founder of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival is fond of saying, "a government's budget is a moral document." It's a reflection of what government has determined is most important to meet the needs of people in our country. So, when it reflects a lack of support for the poor and resources for the needs of immigrants, the most vulnerable people in our country, then it fails to meet the standards our faith calls us to hold. And it's up to us to insist our leaders meet those standards.

And that might mean certain benefits have to be given up. That willingness to yield, James talks about, might apply to our economic and social status. We may be called upon to make sacrifices so that others can have the security they need to thrive. What else is Jesus talking about with his disciples?

In that passage from Mark we find the disciples hearing, but not understanding, Jesus tell them about his persecution and death and resurrection. They're all afraid to ask any questions. But once they're in the house later that evening, Jesus "innocently" asks what they were talking about along the way because they certainly weren't listening to him. And we learn that they did sort of understand what he was talking about after all. Why else would they have been arguing over who's the greatest? They apparently understood that Jesus wouldn't be with them forever and someone would have to be in charge. I think they're really arguing over which of them would succeed Jesus. Talk about ego!

But Jesus does this great thing. This is one of my favorite scenes in the gospels: he takes a child, who happens to be in the house, and places her among them; then he picks her up in his arms and says, "Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all. Anyone who welcomes a child like this in my name, welcomes me." So, first of all: did they even know there was a child in the room? Had they even seen her before that moment? Children were powerless in that society, not unlike in our own. All these men arguing over who has the most power probably had no interest in paying attention to anyone who is powerless. Jesus tells them, unless they're willing to serve the powerless, then they'll never be great.

And second: by elevating a child Jesus teaches them what it means to be submissive. They are to serve, not rule. Only a submissive spirit can enter God's kingdom; only a submissive spirit can lead with wisdom from above. Submission doesn't mean we become doormats; it doesn't mean we tolerate abuse. It means we put aside our own claims to power, no matter how legitimate or valid, and seek to empower the vulnerable. That's what Jesus is trying to impress on his disciples then and now.

We live in a world that is obsessed with power. We participate in a political system that is obsessed with power. The only way that can change is if we are willing to influence it by electing people who demonstrate a willingness to yield, to submit their spirits and welcome the powerless among them. And once we elect them, we continually remind them of who they're missing, who they're not seeing or hearing. We become the voice of those who are silenced; we step aside so those who are invisible can be seen. Just as we expect our leaders to have submissive spirits, we must submit our spirits. Whoever is to be first must be last of all and servant of all.

I realize that expectation of our leaders sounds naïve. But it's no more naïve than the writer of James calling on his community to give up bitter envy and selfish ambition and draw near to God. Or Jesus telling his disciples to be last of all and servant of all. If these standards are just pipe dreams, then why bother to learn them? We're called to bring a message of joy and hope to a world in despair. One way to demonstrate our hope is to hold our leaders accountable for looking after our sisters and brothers in need, to hold them accountable in the belief they can do it and will if we appeal to their better angels, the wisdom from above that dwells in us all.

So, while this season of campaigning goes on a long time, eventually we'll have to make our choices. What kind of a world are we hoping to build? What qualities do we want to see in our leaders? Look for wisdom from above; look for peace, gentleness, mercy, and a rejection of envy and selfish ambition. Ask yourselves who will do the most good for the most vulnerable. Look for submissive spirits, in yourselves and in those you would choose to lead, and let your conscience be your guide.

Amen