

CORE VALUES

If you have children or grandchildren or have spent anytime observing kids at play you may have noticed this phenomena: 2 or 3 kids are playing together and all is copacetic until somebody picks up a new toy, then everyone wants in on the action. What was satisfying them moments earlier is quickly abandoned and cries of “but I wanted it” and “I saw it first” takeover, and next thing you know someone is having a meltdown – likely, the adult in the room! As adults, we can try to intervene: “You need to learn to share and be nice to each other” but such pleas often fall on deaf ears. It’s as if we all contain an inner green eye that is always on the alert for when someone has something more than we have and to respond out of envy rather than generosity. James picks up on this theme in his letter:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

It would seem even as children, just becoming aware of the world around, we have already bought into “earthly wisdom.”

Such wisdom is grounded in the belief of a closed system of limited resources, in which, by necessity, we need to be in completion with one another over scarce resources. Socrates is attributed with saying that envy is the “ulcer of the soul and ancient moralists associated envy with hatred, boorishness, faithlessness, tyranny, malice, hubris, ill will, ambition, and above all arrogance. At its core, envy is built up notions that we are defined by what we have. Having less is equated with being less and having more somehow means you are more – of more value – more “real.” Envy can be so pernicious that it can even warp our prayer life, turning our relationship with God into nothing more than a means to a end. God simply exists to get us what we want and desire, regardless of whether it is truly what we need, health for us, or serving God’s desires for us and our world.

It might be easy to right this malady off as someone else’s illness, a disease of the heart with which we are not afflicted. But let us remember that James is not preaching to an audience that has surrendered to the world, but communities and individuals struggling to be faithful, those, as one scholar puts it:

... who gather in the name of Jesus and profess the faith of the glorious Lord Jesus Christ, but whose attitudes and actions are not yet fully in friendship with God... His readers are not those who live completely by the measure of the world. They are not literally killing each other in order to gain possessions. But they are “double-minded” (4:8). They want to live by another measure, another wisdom, even as they claim God’s measure as their own.

We are all caught in that bind.

The wisdom from below is not easy to abandon or avoid, precisely because it is the “way of the world,” inscribed not only in the language and literature of our surrounding culture but also in our very hearts.

It is not just a matter of social structures or policies and procedures. As one biblical scholar puts it, “but a result of diseased human freedom.” And that is on full display these days, from anti-vaxers and anti-maskers, to those who would limit voting rights, and those who would restrict a women’s control over her own body. All of these causes make the claim that they are rooted in some form of “freedom” but is that really what is driving things? When our demands for individual freedom do harm to others and our community, are we truly free?

As I mentioned at the start, our disordered desires appear to be baked into us: they are seemingly part of our “core.” Preaching professor Casey Thornbaugh Signmon notes:

Etymologically, “core” is more than the center of the body where our physical strength lies. Core is derived from the Old French *cor* [or *Coeur*] meaning heart. Courage comes from the same place etymologically, that is the heart. Discernment begins with the courage to listen to and from your core for the whisper of God.

In your heart, what drives the choices you make? Envy, James asks? Then your wisdom is unspiritual, devilish. Selfish ambition? Your actions betray you as a friend of the world rather than a friend of God.

So how do we address these “core” issues? One author helpful compares two voices within her that seem to compete for her attention:

[an] inner critic as a mean-faced coach with a whistle, blue shorts, white polo, and knee-high white socks—he’s hunkered down, red-faced and yelling at me to do better as I flail about, not lifting from my core.

And,

a beloved spiritual director, nodding, listening, asking those self-awakening questions that help me to hear the wisdom of God in the core of my being. Gentle. Not coercive. Invitational, not manipulating and bullying.

It’s all a matter of which voice you choose to listen to. One clue that we may not be listening to right one is when we feel angry, tense, looking to strike out or back at someone or the world in general. When we are not a peace, it is time to check in with our core – our spiritual heart – and discern what’s going on.

This morning, the United Church of Christ recognizes Just Peace Sunday. It is a time to reflect, particularly for churches such as First Church, that have declared themselves a Just Peace Church, on what that means and how they are living out that commitment. Years ago, First Church made a commitment to peacemaking that states:

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God”

We recognize hostility and alienation in our own lives, in the community of the church, and throughout the world. Yet we believe that through Christ, God offers us peace.

Through the Holy Spirit, we experience Hope. It is the energy that creates our courage to live and our active love for the future of the earth.

We believe that the church exists, not for itself, but for extending Peace to others in the world. Peacemaking lies at the heart of Jesus’ gospel and is therefore integral to the living out of our Christian faith.

We seek to be faithful to God’s call to be peacemakers:

by respecting life in all its variety;
by promoting freedom and justice;
by challenging the values of our age that threaten peace;
by working for peaceful solutions to conflict at home,
in the church, and in the world.

With God’s help and the gifts of courage and caring which God has given us, we will work towards becoming the peacemaking community to which Jesus calls us.

If we are not regularly checking in with our hearts it is easy for the world to pull us off course, for us to buy into the world’s values, to seek value in what we have and what can grasp rather in than in who and whose we are. UCC Stillspeaking devotional author Anthony Robinson notes:

One of the earliest and most abiding Christian insights about human nature is that we were made for God but keep turning away. Just as flowers are “heliotropic,” designed to turn toward the sun, so we humans are “theotropic,” designed to turn toward God.

But somehow our natural theotropism has become faulty and broken. We are more likely to go astray, to turn to our own way, than to turn toward God.

But the good news is we have a still-seeking God who does not give up on us. It is true that we are “prone to wander.” The phrase comes from Robert Robinson’s powerful hymn, “Come, Thou fount of every blessing.”

In that hymn Robinson also wrote this: “Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God.” He knew that, though we turn to our own way again and again, God keeps bringing us back.

This morning, as we reflect on the wisdom of James, may we hear God’s voice calling us back: Calling us back to our true selves, our peaceful selves, our God, Christ, and Spirit-centered selves, our wise selves, that embrace justice and peace, that dare us to see others as God’s children that risks yielding over violent “standing your ground,” that nurtures health, wholeness, grace, and forgiveness in others, because we have rediscovered God’s call – God’s whisper – within ourselves – in our very core – calling us home. AMEN.