



I remember the day driving down 35W when I turned to my colleague and shared my longing for wisdom. I was in my first years in ministry and we were just returning from a networking lunch with other ministry leaders where I could feel the wisdom of the others in the room. Reflecting on the lunch, I felt like a ministry pup – a leader still in training, someone with a lot of learning to do. Yes I had a Bachelor's Degree from a Christian college to rely on and I had grown up in the church, but even a year of full-time youth ministry under my belt I knew there was more. I had ideas, lots of them, but I longed for something deeper. Little did I know, I would soon have the opportunity to discover that the path to wisdom and learned it is often a painful one.

People of God, our text for today tackles a topic we don't often talk about – in church or elsewhere – and that's wisdom. Maybe you, like me, have longed for wisdom, but were not sure what to do about it or where to look for answers. Well – today is your day. As our reading from James highlights wisdom is not simply something that would be good to discover some day, rather true wisdom provides a vision for abundant living.

Thinking back to my years in early adulthood, each day and week, I had choices to make – and I knew there were more things to do than time to do all of them. And while I did not have a way to articulate it at the time, I wanted my life, my work, my relationships to matter – not only to me, but to the world.

Wisdom = begins with a longing

Friends, this longing is the first step toward wisdom. Why? Because it opens us up to the world around us, it gets us to look beyond our first impressions and dig below the surface. My opening myself to wisdom – especially during very difficult times in life – allowed me to put down my pride, my way, my best ideas and seek other alternatives.

True and False Witness today = the difference between knowledge (understanding) and trust in God (wisdom)

James was speaking to a community around the difference between true wisdom and false wisdom. What is true wisdom today, I began to wonder, and what is false wisdom.

And what James would say to our community today? Sitting in my office surrounded by shelves filled with books, I had a clue.

We live in an age where information is everywhere and we can access it at anytime. Want to know when Thomas Jefferson was president? Google it. (By the way, I did and he served from 1801 to 1809.) Need to know how late JoAnn Fabrics is open? Search the web. 24/7 we can get most any information we need or want, and some we don't.

Many of us grew up in an age where knowledge was the name of the game. We were told that a good education is a pathway to opportunity. So we pursued knowledge in various forms. Today we are the highest educated people ever. In the US, today 9 out of 10 people in the have a high school diploma or GED and 1/3 of us have college degrees or higher.

(<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.pdf>)

Knowledge is a goal to pursue. It is a something many of us have invested lots of time and money in pursuit of – we've read books, participated in courses, completed degrees. We have certificates, titles and minds filled with information. All of this knowledge, all of these ideas are a good thing, but we are not careful this pursuit can give us the illusion that we are wise – especially if we have mastered a body of work or have a deep understanding of particular theories.

This high value on knowledge reigns as king in religious circles as well. For many, the Bible is a textbook Christians study - as if they were anticipating a pop quiz and their grades depended on it. Many Protestant denominations (Lutheran included) place a high value on knowledge. Requiring Master degrees and ongoing education for their pastors and church leaders – many in the church overly focus on the knowing part of our faith. This fixation with knowledge often creates unrealistic expectations for leaders and people in the congregation. With all that education, and the fact the congregations pay them, people tend to look to pastors and church staff as the “experts” in God, faith, and Christian living – creating a separation or an “us” and “them” situation. But knowing the Bible or the beliefs of the Christian faith is not the same as following Jesus or living a life of faith. With so much emphasis on knowledge, we often underemphasize our relationship with God and the mysterious and dynamic nature of faith. Winning Bible jeopardy or being able to articulate what 4th century church fathers believed does not make one a “better” or more faithful Christian.

Knowledge is good and comes in many forms but in the end, knowledge is not wisdom. Knowledge comes from ideas or content; wisdom grows out of a relationship.

Wisdom = byproduct of a relationship

You see here's the deal - wisdom is a byproduct of a relationship with the creator of the universe, the one who created you and me, the one who calls us children of God.

Ideas are great, and I encourage all of us here to be learners throughout your life, but ideas do not produce wisdom. Wisdom has a different source and it comes from connecting ourselves – day in and day out – to God. That’s it. And that’s enough. But watch out – this relationship of love changes us. Over time our heart, our mind, and our action begin to reflect this love. Wisdom is a fruit of that relationship. Therefore wisdom is a byproduct – not the goal.

Wisdom’s vision = a peaceful world, a world without divisions, wholeness among communities and people

James continues in this text talking about the ripple effects of true and false wisdom. This is helpful – since wisdom itself feels invisible, it is good to know our actions are a ripple of what we are pursuing and have a ripple effect in the actions of others around us. Therefore actions are one of the ways we can judge whether wisdom is true or false.

So – let’s take a pop quiz. Ready? Answer “true” or “false.”

True wisdom divides communities. [False]

False wisdom builds up people in need. [False]

True wisdom shows favoritism. [False]

False wisdom wipes out disorder and evil. [False]

How’d you do? In case you haven’t figured it out yet, all the answers were false. But let’s review, shall we?

What divides communities – false wisdom.

What builds up people in need – true wisdom.

What shows favoritism – false wisdom.

What wipes out disorder and evil – true wisdom.

When we break wisdom down into simple statements like these, it seems obvious what characterizes true and false wisdom. But it is not always this simple in everyday life. So let me expand on this a bit.

Since true wisdom is a relationship with God, then when our behaviors mirror the characteristics of God... it is true wisdom. And James says these actions are not just isolated events, but ongoing everyday behaviors.

Think about that. Let’s take one characteristic of God – let’s say love – and think about a person in your life who loves you – truly, without question, everyday, even on the hard days loves you. Got that person in mind? Now try to think about what actions or behaviors they do to let you know they love you – and then how often do they do them.

I’m going to use my kids. I truly believe that my daughters both love me – why? Because when they can tell when I’m having a bad day (and they know my moods because we have a relationship with me) they respond in a way that they know will be important to me or make a difference in my life – they offer to make dinner, give me a hug, ask about my day, or simply sit with me. Their actions are not love, but they certainly are an expression of love and a tangible way they tell me – day in and day out – that they love me.

Wisdom = way of life

When I was 25 I thought wisdom was a moment when I made a smart choice – choices contained within a specific period of time or area of my life. What I know now almost 3 decades later is that wisdom flows out of consistent, ordinary moments of being in God’s presence and hanging around with other people who also are in a relationship with God. Over time, as we talk about God’s character and how we are trying to reflect that character in our own lives a vision emerges – one where people live together peacefully, where all seek justice, where difference is not the enemy but welcomed, a place where love is rich and abundant.

True wisdom not only comes from knowing and being in relationship with God, but it also understands the communal nature of our lives – true wisdom has a ripple effect. False wisdom is selfish, seeking status and personal gain.

How do we discover this for ourselves? True wisdom emerges out of a daily pattern of living. True wisdom privileges relationships over ideas. True wisdom connects to a vision of abundant life for all of God’s creation. True wisdom is less about getting answers right and more about discovering good questions worth investigating.

And how do we lead others into such a way of life? What would happen if all of us began living wisely? Imagine the ripple effect if all of us here today committed to creating a lifestyle based on true wisdom. Think of the lives and communities we would touch if all of us were living according to the character of God. Love, mercy, gentleness, compassion, forgiveness, and justice would be witnessed in our actions – and in our homes, places of work and communities.

Some of us will invest in the lives of children – locally. And in investing in these lives, with daily encouragement and support, we will touch the lives of their parents and siblings and plant seeds of God’s vision for abundant living decades into the future. Some of us will invest in organizations that create parts for computers or develop medical devices or distribute goods and services around the world. Wise living might impact our business choices that save lives or unite communities, but wise living could also be visible in the way we treat those we work with and the customers you serve. For me, I teach pastor and church leaders. As I teach I love being with students for a while and then sending them out into the world to make a difference. Every now and I hear stories that bring tears to my eyes because they have left a mark – in the life of a person, a congregation, or a community.

All of us have the opportunity to invite others into God’s abundant vision of life here on earth – and the pathway to that vision is wise living.

AND I believe this is the work of church leaders – today and into the future. Luther Seminary, a seminary of the ELCA where I teach, has a mission to educate leaders for Christian communities. At one time, this education was solely focused on knowledge – knowing the Bible, understanding theology, being able to translate Hebrew and Greek texts, and the list goes on and on. Today we are in the process of shifting our curriculum to reflect James invitation. Sure knowledge is still there, but wisdom now has a more prominent place. We want students to tend to their own relationship with God. We want students to be able to understand what it means for individuals and congregations to be formed by God and discover a Christian way of life. And we want students to be guided by God’s vision of abundant life for all people.